

The Great Global Acceleration of 1890-1914: Eça De Queirós, Imperialist Power and The Far East

Jose Mauricio Saldanha-Alvarez, Universidade Federal Fluminense, Brazil

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Abstract

This research analyzes the Far-Eastern scripture of the Portuguese writer Eça de Queirós (1845-1900), one of the controversial and acclaimed writers of Portugal (and Europe) in the nineteenth century, whose vast work Peter Gay applauded and Harold Bloom integrated into the Western canon. In our work, we detail his critique of industrial capitalism and the Eurocentric position of imperialism in Asia as an exercise of power. In his journalistic activities he showed to the reader the asymmetry of the industrial division of labor that divided the world between aggressive technology producers and the rich and complex cultures holders like China, but without powerful industries and international finance system. In his writings, the otherness is mediated with cultural diversity anticipating multiculturalism, positioning the Far East as a producer of cultural paradigms to the West. As a diplomat of his country, defended uncompromising way the rights of Chinese immigrants, outbound Macau, then Portuguese colony, worked on the Spanish island of Cuba, producing sugar. Our theoretical framework employs Edward Said's concepts to a reading of the East and the notion of the modern world of K. Polanyi, C.A. Bayly, V. I. Lenin, G. Arrighi mediating imperialist power and the depredations of people and nature of imperialism of time preparing the great acceleration of 1890-1914 as a confrontation of powers.

Keywords: Power, Imperialism, Industrialization, Regeneration, Modernity.

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Introduction

The Portuguese journalist and writer José Maria Eça de Queirós (1845-1900) described the last decades of the 19th century as part of a definition process of local powers in Asia in the fight against imperialism. The years 1890-1914 were described by several classical authors such as Lenin and Polanyi, and recent Bayly, Arrighi and Hobsbawm, as a time of great acceleration. It resulted in a new configuration of power in the Far East and in the world.

Eça de Queirós was considered by Peter Gay as one of the most important authors of fiction in the 19th century(Gay, 1986, 416). Harold Bloom, in turn, considered him the canon of Western literature (Bloom, 2002, p.653-693). As a diplomat, he held various positions as his country's Consul. Initially, in Havana, Cuba, between the years 1872 to 1874, where he defended Chinese immigrants leaving China due to the Portuguese possession of Macau (Monica, 2001, 127). He was also Consul in England and in Paris, city where he came to pass away, in 1900.

As a journalist, he kept in touch with the progress of international news and as a diplomat with the diplomatic community, gathering information, developing privileged viewpoints in relation to the big international final acceleration of the 19th century, as well as the issues relating to imperialism and to power. Following the news regarding the Far East, he realized that a structural change of enormous importance was occurring in China and Japan, which reflected on the issue of power. The amplitude of the same was a more complex process of worldwide transformations at the time of the great acceleration.

The scope of this article is to establish a dialogue between journalism and history, culture and economy of that era, noting the emergence of Asian powers as a prophecy of Eça de Queirós in relation to Asian dominance in contemporary times.

Considering imperialism: transformations in the world.

The literature we've selected to support the basic premise of this paper notes the establishment of a world under acceleration during the last decades of the nineteenth century. A time in which the exercise of the imperial power of European countries occurred - England and France - and the emergence of new countries, United States, Germany, Italy and Belgium. At the same time, the Ancient Empires like the Ottomans, but especially the Chinese Empire, had difficulty in successfully facing foreign threats. These ancient powers lived the dilemma of change by a modernizing regeneration or to disappear under the onslaught of Europeans. The exercise of power of these empires reduced considerably, because besides being devoid of effective military assets, they saw themselves as politically divided. Endowed with traditional powers, they imposed their will on their subjects, but lost ground to the skill with which Great Britain or France moved their own instruments of power.

At the same time, Asia noted the emergence of a cohesive nation State, Japan (Polanyi,1957, 20) that proved able to combine its political and military power tools with remarkable success (Bobbio, 1983, II, 938-939).

Since the first decades of the 19th century, new Latin American countries entered the international arena within the new industrial labour division. In the final decades of the century of certainties, the producers of raw materials were benefited by outbreaks of export that would boost their commodities, which ranged from Chilean nitrate, coffee from Brazil to Uruguayan meat (Hobsbawm, 2010, 99).

Some authors such as Polanyi consider that the 19th century produced a historic, economic and cultural phenomenon, unprecedented in the midst of relative world peace. It lasted for almost a hundred years, coexisting with smaller, short-lived wars. The technological revolution resulted in major changes in the ways of producing goods and services in the most powerful industrial nations (Polanyi, 1957, 19). In the end, all countries were being gradually drawn into the orbit of the new international labour division, pivoted by the revolution in transport and communication which accelerated connection throughout the world (Nayyar, 2013,41). According to Hobsbawm, the greatest achievement of the 19th century was the establishment of a single economy, which extended gradually until it reached the most distant regions of the globe (Hobsbawm, 2010, 99).

By analysing the emergence of imperialism in his famous work, V.I. Lenin stressed the growing role of banks and finance in the process of the exercise of imperial power. When the banking concentration in the central countries placed the resources of a mass of small capitalists under the control of a few but powerful holders of capital, things changed. The reinforced financial system went on to be one of the "fundamental transformation processes of capitalism in imperialism"(Lenin, 2010, 138). This banking network reveals itself to be more dense and active in the most powerful countries: France and England. They started to apply voluminous capitals in the colonial world and in other European nations such as Portugal. The result of the banks' growing power resulted in a concentration of political power in their hands, because the State joined the bankers who had begun to dominate the industry, the press and, finally, the government itself.

The exercise of power of the most powerful countries and their finances in non-European countries started to be practised directly, either through military domination, or indirectly, through massive capital investments, which turned those who received them taxable in powerful countries. As there were no more unowned territories in the world, repossessions would forcefully happen exacerbating international relations. As Lenin states, apart from England and France, new countries "have progressed with an extraordinary speed, America, Germany and Japan (Lenin, 2010,207-229), and which quickly became the newest imperialist power. To fulfill its national projects of growth, markets and territorial expansion, they had to re-divide the territories by force and take portions from the most fragile and unprotected, such as the Turkish Empire, the Spanish and the Chinese.

On the other hand, a recent author like Bayly, named that era as "The great acceleration, 1890-1914" as a time in which "things to come", were predicted and which survived in the midst of crises and conflicts in the extra European world involving the imperial powers and their respective spheres of influence (Bayly, 2004 ,451). An author like J. A. Hobson, a British liberal, pointed out the evil Alliance between the power of the State and financial, industrial and commercial sectors in the action of stripping their colonies and tributaries (Bayly,2004, 454). Once again,

China and Japan are placed in the centre of the debates. On the other hand, the Chinese Empire, torn by internal wars, resisted, thus leaving K. M. Panikkar to explain that unlike India, China did not yield before British pressures, maintaining its political unity (Panikkar, 1953, 94, 175). The second was the Japanese Empire, which, after a dramatic industrial growth and accelerated modernization, defeated China in 1895. After taking possession of Korea, it had to be restrained by the force of the Shimonoseki Treaty.

The Japanese national State: power and representation

Since 1648, the national States in Western Europe, were essential units in the world politics of the modern era (Arrighi, Silver, 1999, 19). When intervening in Asia, the commercial and financial companies were assisted by economic and military instruments of power, coordinated by the institutional system of their respective Nation States¹. For Arrighi and Silver, "This system came up with an aggressive and militant process that introduced the dynamics of progress", pushing the opening of China to foreigners and starting the Scramble for Africa (Arrighi and Silver, 1999, 20). The National State in both themes, China and Japan, desiring to industrialize so as not to perish, behaved differently in achieving their national goals and therefore its construction in Asia was different, older and more crystallized than in the West.

The ancient Chinese Empire, to which the profound sympathies of Eça de Queirós leaned towards, was torn apart by internal clashes and popular uprisings. The struggle for modernization that the country undertook was oscillatory and contradictory, reflecting the tensions and conflicts within their power structure. Therefore, we see that the empire was not launched unitary in the regenerative battle, losing part of its millenarian sinocentric regional economic system that integrated Japan, China and Korea (Howe, 1996, 3-7).

The Japanese isolation, however, continued, until Commodore Perry forced the opening of Japan, consolidated with the unequal Treaty of 1854. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 began a series of reforms aimed at making Japan a modern industrial nation, building weapons to control "the foreign barbarians" and avoid being dominated by them (Arrighi & Silver, 1999, 261). The Japanese isolation, however, continued, until Commodore Perry forced the opening of Japan, consolidated with the unequal Treaty of 1854. If the power in Japan was traditional, it not only relied on the ability to coerce its subjects, but coming from a tradition which, according to Weber, is founded on the belief of a sacredness that is imposed on its subjects through State mechanisms linked directly to the source of power which has existed "since forever" (Bobbio, 1983, II, 941).

The Japanese national state played an important role in that institutionalization, soliciting support from its people (Wittner, 2007, 26). Its meteoric economic ascension led it to start its colonial empire in Taiwan. By capturing Korea, it extended its colonial process, inspired, albeit indirectly, by the English experience (Bayly, 2004, 461). Finally, the victory obtained in the war against China of 1894-1895, showed the far East and the local nationalist leaders that Western domination was not perennial. In the wake of this expansion that generates imaginary dividends, in India and Brazil, distant countries to the Japanese victory in Tsushima against the Russian Empire in 1905, parents began to baptise their children with the name of Japanese admirals, like

Togo. In Abyssinia, on a high due to the victory against the Italian invasion, its main social scientist urged the country's Government to imitate Japan (Bayly, 2004, 461).

The National State in China: the most ancient system of power on earth

Eça had a great affection and respect for China. Having known many Chinese and read abundant literature about its rich culture, he was the author of a fantastic novel, *O Mandarim* (1880). Displacing his main character from southern Europe to China, its main story is set in Beijing, the capital that he had never seen in person.

On a subject that described the crisis that China lived, he showed that the country, since the unequal treaties of 1842, was being shaken by crises. Its vulnerability led it to grant increasing concessions to England and other countries, whose privileges, supported by warships, steamboats, the telegraph and rail-roads, were destroying and ruining the local economy. In the face of imperial weakness, Chinese Administration sectors undertake the so-called 'self-fortification' program. They began to build up arsenals, shipyards and military academies.

Upon analyzing China, Eric Hobsbawm notes that it had three forces that were able to confront foreign pressure. Firstly the Court itself, understood as a place of resistance. It was in this laboratory of power that the Confucian officials realized that only the adoption of the Western model of industrialisation and modernisation could lead China to overcome its obstacles and its military weakness. Hobsbawm points out that the Japanese were a successful model in Asia, actually itself incited in Western practices. However, they feared the moral degradation that could result from this policy. Against this position, the foreign action and the setbacks of the court system had led to failure.

In an article from the *Páginas Esquecidas* (Forgotten Pages), Eça analyzes this crisis in which his admired China lived among the revolution, the agitation and the attempts to modernize, only without losing China's existence and its traditional values. Actually, what he detected was an internal conflict between the holders of the traditional power, the one that "has always existed". The Cabinet was present at the construction of the railway between Beijing and Hanwueu. According to Eça, the railway was already planned, but "the old Conservative Party had always prevented its realization with the reason or pretext that a noisy acceleration of movements would disrupt the rural tranquillity of China, would provoke the repugnant foreign presence and offend, with the implementation of rails and the drilling of tunnels, the holiness and recoil of the earth, and could displeasure her and urge her towards these impatient movements that we call earthquakes" (Eça de Queirós, 934,935).

Eça realizes that there is a confrontation on the throne, because, if the Empress is conservative and contrary to the railway's project, the young emperor, by being more determined and bold, is favourable. He detected a great economic opportunity for the central power with the implementation of the railway. He points out that the price of land is almost null, the labour cost is next to nothing and it should make a good profit for the State's coffers. Because the transportation of food and clothing to the capital Beijing, in addition to passengers in a countless number, would all be very lucrative. He points out that a political trump would be to reinforce the centralization of power over large distances in the country. And "the difficulty in monitoring the project throughout vast distances, mandarins and Governors of remote provinces, the cost of

concentrating and quickly dispatching troops and the impossibility to centralize trade and finance in the capital"(Eça de Queirós, 935). Eça does not cease to point out that, if, on one hand, the completed rail-road benefited Beijing, it also benefited the British capitalism. Exactly because, "England, above all, because it sees in it a first acceptance of the Western ideas, and through them, an additional influence in the 'mandarinism' of Beijing".

However, the author seems to talk with himself and with the story. It seemed to him that the British perception was mistaken. "It won't be due to travelling faster that China will lose its contempt and horror for foreigners. This contempt has roots in morals and religion, that no improvement in the material means of transport can modify. Neither our industrial progress, nor our intelligence and science constitutes a strong enough influence to 'un-Chinese' the Chinese. On the contrary, the more it knows us - the less it respects a civilization that it considers to be singularly tumultuous and sterile".

And he'd cite examples of Chinese nationals who, residing in California, were increasingly fanatic as Chinese despite knowing the American material progress. They'd turn towards "China with a patriotism that was doubly rooted and fanatic." But it would not lose sight of the issue of obtaining the material instruments of power. And he would quote a Chinese intellectual who studied in Paris, which made him admire Beijing even more. And the income taxation of the rail-road would make the central Government even stronger "and feeling stronger, it will become more intransigent (Eça de Queirós, 936).

The great acceleration in Asia: the sino-Japanese war in the eyes of Eça.

The first impression that Eça transmits to the reader about the outbreak of the conflict is that "this war between two strong Nations of the far East only offers the interest of a military pantomime, spent in a region of fantasy" (Eça de Queirós,2000, vol. III,1374-1375). However, he refutes the notion of exoticism of the contenders, a misleading specular image born from a Eurocentric speech. It is thanks to "certain strange traces of figure and costume seen in engravings; detailed of customs and ceremonies, learnt from newspapers (articles on varieties), with caricatures or fantastic beings and, above all, with what we see of its art - that is how we construct our concise and definitive impression of the Chinese and Japanese society"(Eca de Queirós, 2000, vol.III, 1375).

Eça then makes us acknowledge that, behind all these stereotypes, prejudice and ignorance, "there were strong social institutions and it tames an old and copious literature, an intense moral life, fruitful working methods, ignored energies, that the average European doesn't even suspect of"(Eca de Queirós, 2000,vol.III, 1375). For Eça, the enmity between China and Japan resembled the existing friction between France and England who lived in a climate of perpetual antagonism in the 19th century: "They are the two great nations of the far East, where both aspire predominance: they have a similar development in literature and art, even in certain national industries that both export and which clash on the markets".

Here, the issue of power again gives way to the conflicts from an antagonism between forces for the supreme power in the region's imaginary and which confides in

territorial and material benefits: the mandate of the heavens. When managing an increasing number of Asians under its control, the Japanese power obtains a consolidated sphere of its legitimacy (Bobbio, II, 936).

Then, the initial exchange of hostilities between China and Japan regarding rights in the region, made war break out and, in a few weeks, "Japan occupied Korea, dismantled the old King and the old Government, rejected the Chinese army, exchanged the Chinese armada, invaded Chinese soil and began a march on Beijing to impose on the Son of the Heavens, inside the Holy City, a peace that was full of shame and ruin. For now, the Japanese were still marching far from Beijing, (when he wrote the story, the war was still not over). But when it finally arrives, as history forebode, China would have suffered the greatest affront of all its history of 6,000 years"(Eça de Queirós, 2000, 1383). In his prediction, he suggests that to obtain the power to confront the foreign invaders, its banks and military art, China should soon "become European, have more resources and be more scientific, more modern. She will do exactly what Japan did these last fifteen years (...). In at least twenty years, China may be the most powerful military nation on earth"(Eça de Queirós, 2000, 1383).

Conclusion

Eça de Queirós was a native of a small country, Portugal, a country with a huge agricultural empire at a time of aggressive imperialist redivision. Pressed by the emergence of the German empire and the British empire that threatened it with an ultimatum in 1890. Analysing the regeneration of the Chinese empire was rethinking its own. Considering the Japanese miracle was thinking of a solution for its own industrial tardiness.

After reporting the internal conflicts that lacerated China and weakened its struggle against foreigners and their threats, he detailed the measures adopted to overcome the obstacles. As in Portugal, the struggle in China between conservatives and progressives benefited the conservatives which, in a last instance, facilitated foreign domination. On the other hand, the rapid advances that Japan obtained, put it in a favourable position to compete for the Korean and insular territories, such as the Taiwan of a weak and divided China.

The concentration of the financial power found the support structure and the power tools of the European national states to penetrate into Asia, destroying the sinocentric system and shaping the world in its economic Eurocentric system. At the time of the great acceleration, a new power could emerge, as Japan did in Asia, but in Asia, the oldest power – China - could regenerate and rebuild itself. But China's revolt was just beginning, which only accentuates the prophetic role played by Eça de Queirós, seen in our work as a subtle international policy analyst of his time.

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Contact email: saldanhaalvarez@hotmail.com
