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## Review of Tamar Herzog, *Frontiers of Possession: Spain and Portugal in Europe and the Americas.*

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## **BSPHS 40: 1 (2015)**

Tamar Herzog, *Frontiers of Possession: Spain and Portugal in Europe and the Americas*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015. 400pp.

In this new book, Tamar Herzog analyses the complex processes of border making and territorial conflicts between Spain and Portugal in both Europe and the Americas over the long term. Rather than focusing on more traditional features of border-making such as treaties, royal policy, war, and diplomacy, she argues that possession, everyday interactions, and negotiations were actually much more decisive aspects of the process.

Addressing the lived experiences of individuals and communities on both sides of the Atlantic from a variety of primary sources researched in dozens of European and American archives, Herzog demonstrates that territorial confrontations between Iberians were mostly unplanned and uncontrolled, and involved the interests of a great diversity of agents, including not only monarchs, ministers, and diplomats, but also natives, settlers, ecclesiastics, governors, military men, nobles, municipalities, peasants, and fishermen. The book is organized in two parts with two chapters each.

In part I, *Defining Imperial Spaces: How South America Became a Contested Territory*, Herzog argues that Spanish and Portuguese claims in South America relied on European traditions of formal documents and legal doctrines. According to her, documents such as papal bulls and treaties repeatedly failed to define Iberian borders because of the lack of precise geographic knowledge of the regions and endless disagreements over interpretation and demarcation. The assumption that possession must be made public and without opposition made the use of violence performative, as silence implied consent and reaction implied opposition.

European legal doctrines progressively came to recognize possession as the most legitimate factor in determining land rights and the acquisition of overseas territories. Based on this, Iberians argued for the lack of sedentary occupation and cultivation by indigenous groups in order to justify their own claims of property rights and jurisdiction over lands and peoples in America. They also assumed that any kind of presence was directed at establishing occupation, although only actions commissioned by the crown or performed by vassals could produce title. Thus, it demanded the identification of who was a Spaniard and who a Portuguese, an issue further complicated by the union and separation of Spain and Portugal.

Analysing territorial claims to the River Plate and Amazon basins, Herzog explains that the process involved many different local agents with their own unique interests. Spaniards and Portuguese assumed that any kind of contact with native peoples (conquest, alliance, religious conversion) produced civic adhesion, generating territorial rights, just like improvement did for the English. However,

the natives were never passive players: they bargained for benefits, played Spanish against Portuguese, and often threatened to ally with enemies if their demands were not met. This interplay often even produced the ethnogenesis of new native groups.

In part II, *Defining European Spaces: The Making of Spain and Portugal in Iberia*, Herzog discusses territorial conflicts among neighbouring communities between Alentejo/Andalucia, and Minho/Trás-os-Montes/Galicia, ranging from the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries. Generally, these border communities were closely connected and some villages had mixed populations and hybrid jurisdictions. Territorial conflicts between them usually consisted of struggles between neighbours over usage rights (grazing, collecting, and cultivating) and jurisdiction (imprisoning, recruiting, and taxing). Not yet conceived of as contests over national frontiers, these disputes were common even within the same kingdoms, and monarchs were called upon only in order to mediate local disagreements.

As in America, the author indicates that legal accords in Iberia failed to provide solutions, and appeals to immemorial rights, witnesses and documents largely represented claims rather than proper proofs. As locals did not agree on demarcation, they traditionally decided to share the contested territories and allow double jurisdiction, often prohibiting the exercise of acts of jurisdiction and activities like cultivating and building, which could generate private possession. This situation allowed residents to enjoy exemptions from taxation and military service, claiming to be either Spanish or Portuguese according to convenience.

Herzog argues that the mid-eighteenth century was a turning point on both sides of the Atlantic. In America, the presence of settlers, civil authorities, and scientists in the interior increased; missions were transformed into state-run settlements; Indians became vassals; and conversion gave way to political allegiance and acculturation. In Europe, royal intervention became more effective. Common fields and jurisdictional pluralism were progressively replaced by private property and exclusive royal sovereignty. Moreover, as happened with the American natives, European peasants were stereotyped as primitive and unyielding subjects who should be dispossessed.

In *Frontiers of Possession*, Herzog presents the most comprehensive territorial history of the Iberians in both Europe and America. Its most important contribution is in proving how closely entangled and mutually influenced the Iberians were on both sides of the Atlantic. Building upon Herzog's ground-breaking work, we might now begin integrating Africa and Africans into the invention of territories, frontiers and identities in the broader Atlantic world.

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