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Review of: Mary Soderstrom, *Making Waves: The Continuing Portuguese Adventure*

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Soderstrom, Mary. *Making Waves: The Continuing Portuguese Adventure*.
Montreal: Vehicule Press, 2010. 243 pp.

In this short book, Mary Soderstrom combines history, anecdote, travelogue, and autobiography to sail briskly through 500 years of Lusophone history. In ten chapters, she moves from the first Portuguese discoveries in the Atlantic to the current worldwide distribution of the Portuguese language. Along the way she considers places as widely separated as San Diego and Mozambique, as well as many other spots in between where the Portuguese settled. Such remarkable geographical breadth, paralleling, of course, the Portuguese's own historical experience, constitutes one of the principal strengths of the book. As in the best recent literature on the Atlantic empires, Soderstrom has taken on the challenge of describing concurrently the multiple histories of an extremely widely-separated, disunited group of people. Her range of sources is equally broad, encompassing literature, music, science, and personal travels. If the book is far heavier on Portugal and Brazil (the mother country's "large, exuberant offspring") than on Lusophone Africa, it nonetheless manages to paint a convincing picture of continuing ties between people throughout the former empire.

Soderstrom's *leitmotif* is that, despite the undeniable negative aspects of modern European expansion, the Portuguese accomplished much of lasting value when they sailed beyond the Tagus. In the opening chapter she asserts that the Portuguese discoveries of the fifteenth century were more impressive than anything Columbus achieved, and in a later comparison of European colonial practices the Portuguese also come off quite well. They were more willing to intermarry with local women, they did not obsess about race in the same manner as the English, and even during the colonial wars of the twentieth century the ordinary Portuguese soldiers did not seem to have much taste for the fight. Meanwhile, poets and novelists from Luiz Vaz de Camões to Antonio Lobo Antunes captured all the glory, heartbreak, and *saudade* in timeless verse.

Soderstrom devotes the last chapter of *Making Waves* to discerning the lessons the contemporary world might learn from Portuguese history. Here, she claims, the Portuguese belief that "racial distinctions on face value are useless" can inform modern attitudes towards race. Additionally, the mixed history of dictatorship and democracy in Portugal and Brazil suggest to her the "importance of leadership." In one of Soderstrom's most interesting – and unexpected –

episodes she compares the urban planning involved in rebuilding Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake and the building of Brasilia out of the wilderness in the late 1950s. Ironically, the autocratic Marquis de Pombal created a much more successful city that provided far better for its poorest citizens than did the democratically-elected Juscelino Kubitschek. If the lesson here seems vague (it is hard to argue against the importance of good leadership, but the global Portuguese example hardly provides any guide for how to get it), similar fudges reappear throughout the book. The recurrent insistence on Portuguese primacy in exploration would have interested sixteenth-century legal scholars far more than contemporary readers, for whom the question retains little relevance. Soderstrom is careful not to whitewash Portugal and Brazil's racist pasts – a chapter on the contradictions of Gilberto Freyre's theories on "racial democracy" and Lusotropicalism is particularly good – but the idea that their past can provide a roadmap for a world that has mostly already rejected the theoretical underpinnings of racism requires more information on the present. Soderstrom hints at, but does not elaborate on the degree of racial tension still felt in Brazil, rising in Portugal, and broken in Africa only by the all-out retreat of Portuguese colonists in the 1960s.

Thus, Soderstrom's book will hardly satisfy professional historians. In fact, *Making Waves* would have been stronger with less history. The story of Portuguese exploration is told better in other books (C.R. Boxer's short *The Portuguese Overseas Empire* remains an accessible classic), and there is little new that Soderstrom can say on the topic. Instead, by far the book's strongest points come from the author's own experiences, artistic sensibilities, and background in urban planning. Several later chapters really sparkle as the story moves away from distant centuries. A comparison of the roles of *samba* and *fado* in the politics of the twentieth century makes a compelling claim for popular culture's importance in crafting political change. It also recaptures the feelings of life during dictatorship and revolution in a way that more rigorous history cannot. While it is difficult to recommend the book as a whole for college classes, these latter, stronger chapters could provide excellent supplementary readings for students. Otherwise, *Making Waves* is an engaging, enjoyable read – take it with you on the plane to any place the Portuguese once sailed and you will receive a quick orientation into the continued vibrancy of the world-spanning culture they created.

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