

THE WAR OF BROTHERS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD: THE U.S. CIVIL WAR AND THE 1860s

 *Juliana Jardim de Oliveira*^{1,2}

Book Review: DOYLE, Don H. *The Cause of All Nations. An International History of the American Civil War*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015. 382p.

“You cannot see, because it is your everyday life, (...) the magnitude of the events through which you are passing in the light of their influence on the rest of the world”.

(Dr. William E. Johnston, p.2)

We are now sufficiently familiar with the idea of a global and transatlantic history to understand the importance of *The Cause of All Nations* to this field in general history and U.S. history in particular. What we still might not be completely familiar with is the idea that the American Civil War was an event of international proportions in many senses: economic, so-

1 Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto. Ouro Preto – Minas Gerais – Brasil.

2 Licenciada e bacharel em História pela Universidade Federal de Viçosa (2007), mestre em História pela Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto (2010), doutoranda do programa de Pós-Graduação em História da Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto. Ênfase em História da construção dos Estados Nacionais na América, particularmente Argentina, Brasil e Estados Unidos. Atualmente pesquisa a Guerra Civil dos EUA como evento internacional e seu impacto nos debates parlamentares brasileiros.

cial, political, and ideological. Therefore, its outcomes can no longer be constricted to U.S. formation, reinforcing the idea that this was a “fratricide” accident within the narrative of national formation in the United States, but that its influence has reached places far beyond the U.S. and can also be considered a breaking point in a global scope. And, although the question of how to produce a transatlantic, Atlantic, or global history is still object of debate and questioning by its own scholars, in this book we will find that the author masters it: he is able to use local, regional, national and transnational lens throughout his narrative, making it look like an easy enterprise.

The importance of the Civil War as an international event of great proportions is what the American historian Don Doyle, the McCausland Professor of History at the University of South Carolina, demonstrates in his book. He has developed the theme of secession in a comparative perspective for many years (*Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question; Nationalism in the New World*, co-edited with Marco Pamplona; *Secession as an International Phenomenon*, a collection of essays) and teaches American history, nationalism, and Southern History. With broad experience in the U.S. and other countries such as Italy and Brazil, he has demonstrated American and non-American historians that, far from being an event “as American as apple pie”, the American Civil War not only *can* be seen from an international and Atlantic perspective, but that this outlook is necessary, especially from the point of view of the American continent.

Parting from the idea that the Civil War is inserted in a much broader moment of history, “the crisis of the 1860s”, we are able to understand international reactions, fears, expectancies and politics that surrounded one of the most, if not the most studied theme in American history. Don H. Doyle’s main thesis is that the Civil War mattered a great deal to the Western world in the second half of the nineteenth century. And it mattered because it was not simply an intestinal war, fought only by American soldiers on American soil, but it represented a struggle over fundamental themes of the time, such as republicanism, freedom, national sovereignty, and slavery. It is in that sense that the Civil War can be perceived as “the cause of all na-



tions”. And, although we all acknowledge the outcomes of the war, and the growth of the United States as a world potency, the future of the war was not defined at the time, and the international community of states and nations in the nineteenth century had a close eye on what was going on in the U.S.

Thus, rather than imposing an international framing of the conflict, Doyle asserts that this work actually “retrieves a commonplace understanding of the time”. This idea has already been brought by other historians that have affirmed the importance of the issues at stake in the “Civil War Era”, such as nationalism, democracy, liberty, equality, race, majority rule and minority rights, central authority and local self-government, the use and abuse of power, and the horrors of an all-out-war – are as alive in the early twenty-first century as they were in the mid-nineteenth century.

This is demonstrated in a fluid, exciting, and coherent narrative that follows the chronological events of the war engaged through different topics, characters and diplomatic disputes distributed throughout 12 chapters and based on an extensive variety of sources: diplomatic and personal correspondences, newspapers, pamphlets, translations, images, posters, and official documents from several nations.

One of the main issues pointed out by Prof. Doyle is that the United States was not only viewed as a nation growing in size and importance, but it virtually represented the major successful republican experiment to the world. In face of the failure of the republican movements of 1848 in Europe, it is not surprising that a government of the people and by the people, and a republic of such large dimensions (the only other example was Switzerland) was seen as doomed to failure. Conservatives in Europe expected this failure to assert that Monarchy was, as it had always been, the best method of government. On the other hand, the remains of the republican and liberal movements in Europe and the successfully republican, but very troubled governments, in Latin America looked at the U.S. with the hope they would one day thrive as their neighbor, and counted on its protection from European incursions, in thesis guaranteed by the Monroe doctrine.

We are reminded of the great power that the press had gained by the 1860s, especially due to “print technology and the expansion of literacy, which made cheap publications and mass-audience possible” (p.3), which contributed to the understanding of the war and to the debates over it. As an event that has been analyzed from so many perspectives, the author chooses here to demonstrate that not only it mattered economically to the world (the relationship of the western world with the American cotton has been very well established), but its struggle over republicanism, freedom, and slavery was a central issue, especially through the eyes of the world and the need of international recognition from both the Union and the Confederate sides. The author also affirms that in its need of diplomacy and international support, the American Civil War pioneered what we now call *public diplomacy*, “the first, deliberate, sustained, state-sponsored programs aimed at influencing the public mind abroad” (p.3). From that perspective he sets himself apart from a strictly diplomatic history of the Civil War, building his arguments upon how an international public opinion was built over the war, and how it influenced and was influenced by the events, debates, and particular matters in their own nations.

Divided in three parts, “Only a Civil War”, “The American Question”, and “Liberty’s War”, we are guided through the definition of the Civil War on both sides, its international scope and outcomes. In the first part, composed of 3 chapters, we are drawn to understand one main question: what was the United States fighting for? The question issued by Garibaldi about whether the war was being fought over slavery or not, expressed the “moral confusion over just what the Union was fighting for” (p.24). How the Union and the Confederacy placed themselves internationally to guarantee, on one side, that governments did not recognize the CSA (Confederate States of America), and, on the other, to be recognized as a belligerent state is the main question in this part of the book. That is, the ideological and discursive dispute based on the idea of a “right” to secession in the realm of international law and within the American Constitution. Doyle affirms, nonetheless that this “legal quarrel (...) obscured a far more

salient question as to the *reason* for secession” (p.29). That reason was being questioned by the international community and it was being answered through public diplomacy as Union and CSA struggled for support. And, although both sides initially tried to elude it, “every one of South Carolina’s grievances centered on slavery” (p.30). British, Spanish, and French declarations of neutrality threatened the Union and gave strength to the Confederacy, a diplomatic battle that would be stretched by the military victories of the CSA. Lincoln’s inaugural address in 1861 sought to place the Civil War as an international conflict, based on the principle of international law and the perpetuity of the union, and placed, once again, the extinction of slavery as a secondary matter: “the main issue before the public was already ‘Union or Disunion’, not slavery or abolition” (p.65). Apparently, however, Europeans were not at all concerned with local politics and the rights to secession. In that sense, it would be better to place the war upon “a higher moral basis”, and Europeans from different social sectors began to answer Garibaldi’s questions for themselves.

The second part of the book – The American Question – shows how the conflict was growing in the minds of the world as a global struggle, particularly as a crisis of life and death to the republican experiment “within the context of alternating swells of revolutionary hope and reactionary oppression that radiated through the Atlantic world in the Age of Revolution” (p.85). Republicanism, democracy, natural rights, and slavery, social change and structure, the delights of the conservatives in Europe and the fears of the liberals in view of the War: all that came to earth in the eyes of international observers of the conflict. Extreme democracy was at its death bed and the Empire powers, Britain, Spain, and France resurged and believed it possible to restore their authority. The imbrications of European politics concerning the Americas and their old colonies, as well as the role of foreign views on the conflict, which made their way to the U.S. through important translations of books and pamphlets, demonstrated how intellectuals were elaborating their own meaning of the conflict, helping to place the Civil War as an ideological conflict between slavery and freedom, monarchy and republicanism. It became definitely

a global matter. The last chapter of Part II demonstrates how the Civil War became an internationalized conflict not only intellectually, but also in the battle front. Don H. Doyle brings to light the “Foreign Legions” that added up the military layers of the Union army, constituting among immigrants and sons of immigrants “well over 40 percent of the Union’s foreign-born soldiers” (p.159). Although this is not an unprecedented theme in the studies of the Civil War, Don H. Doyle is able to place their participation in a broad understanding of why these immigrants were so willing to fight for America within the international understanding of the Civil War and the construction of the American nation.

In the final part of the book, “Liberty’s War”, the author demonstrates how the war was defined not only as a war over slavery, but also as a struggle between democratic and monarchical governments and ideals, that is, the struggle for the people’s freedom. In that sense, he unveils the “Confederacy’s shift to the right” (p.186), referring to the support from the French sought by the CSA. This meant that not only was the South fighting for slavery, but to do so it was willing to support and negotiate with conservative European governments and to accept their interference in the American continent, including by offering what “can only be described as a magnificent bribe” (p.203) in the form of a very advantageous and long-term commercial treaty, in exchange for Napoleon III’s declared support of the South. The year of 1862 represented the greatest threat of foreign intervention in the Americas, and in that sense, a threat to all republican governments. The Union’s soft power was also directed at broadening the idea of “national preservation” to all governments by the people in the world, “the outcome of the American contest would decide nothing less than the fate of democracy” (p.215).

How the Union and CSA continuously fought in the field of public diplomacy for this narrative is one of the main points placed by DonH. Doyle, arguing that, considering all the military and political world powers engaged and interested in the outcomes of the American conflict, this diplomatic war was as important as the battlefields in American soil. Throughout the last part of the book, the author is

able to discuss the significant changes occurring in Europe, not only towards the American Civil War and slavery, but also towards republicanism, particularly in face of the movement for national consolidation in Italy, led by Garibaldi and Mazzini, up to what he calls a “Republican *Risorgimento*”, which again altered the ideological frames of Europe and the Americas.

This book is not an attempt to account for the Civil War in its totality, it is not a new book on what was the Civil War, its causes and consequences, or how its main events and battles developed. Rather, it offers the opportunity to envision it as an international event that was part of a much broader crisis, which carried beneath it fundamental struggles, problems, and dilemmas that regarded the Western world at the second half of the nineteenth century. The American Civil War had a profound impact on the international relations of the early 1860s and high economic, social and ideological issues were at stake: a “struggle that shook the Atlantic world and decided the fate of slavery and democracy” (p.313). This book places the U.S. among other nations that, to survive as a unified national state, depended upon the support and approval of European and American nations. In this sense, it relates the future of the United States to that of other transatlantic relations and vice-versa. In doing this, not only he helps to give one step further towards the rupture with the idea of exceptionalism in American history, he also goes past its traditional links with Europe, including Latin America as part of the world being built in the 1860s, with its own contradictions and expectations. For Brazilian historians, it gives the opportunity to also step back from our own ideas of exceptionalism in the history of Brazil, understanding the political, economic, and ideological interconnections among the American continent, and that transatlantic history is a possible and fruitful path to do so.

Bibliography

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