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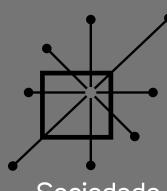
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Beyond Politics: Reconstructing the Political through Arbitration in Brazilian Boundary Diplomacy under Imperialism

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Abstract

Drawing on Pierre Rosanvallon's conceptual distinction between *politics* and *the political*, this article argues that the latter can only be apprehended through what Rosanvallon terms a *globalizing analysis*: an analytical approach that reconstructs the structures of intelligibility, legitimacy, and normativity through which collective life is organized. Rather than treating *the political* as a mere aggregation of institutions, actors, or events, I examine how political meaning is produced, constrained, and rendered legitimate in situations of tension and asymmetry. To do so, I analyze the boundary arbitration between Brazil and the United Kingdom, the Pirara Question (1904), and situate it within the unequal imperial international order of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The article shows that the arbitration instance functioned not only as a diplomatic mechanism, but as a political grammar through which Brazil sought to affirm sovereignty, legality, and international legitimacy under conditions of structural inequality. By mobilizing contributions from conceptual history, political theory, philosophy, and sociology as analytical instruments - rather than as external supplements - I demonstrate how a *globalizing analysis of the political* allows historians to move beyond event-centered narratives and to historicize the normative foundations of political action itself.

Keywords

The political; Globalizing analysis; Pierre Rosanvallon



The political and the globalizing analysis: an inseparable binomial

In his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France* in 2002, Pierre Rosanvallon framed the renewal of political history as a problem of analytical scope rather than of thematic expansion. His intervention was grounded in a conceptual distinction that structures his broader historiographical project: the difference between politics and *the political*, inseparable from what he terms a *globalizing analysis*. Rather than proposing a mere enlargement of historical context, Rosanvallon argues for an approach capable of reconstructing the conditions through which collective life becomes intelligible, legitimate, and normatively organized. It is from this conceptual pairing that his proposal for a renewed political history unfolds.

The political, in this sense, does not designate a delimited domain of activity - such as institutions, parties, or governmental action - but rather the ensemble of relations, norms, and representations. To study *the political* is therefore not to accumulate contextual layers around events, but to reconstruct the underlying structures that organize how a society understands authority, equality, responsibility, and belonging.

From this perspective, a *globalizing analysis* does not imply a change of scale toward the "global" understood geographically. Instead, it designates an analytical operation through which the historian recomposes *the political* as a whole, articulating social, legal, symbolic, and moral dimensions that are often treated separately. Such an approach is particularly productive in moments of tension or asymmetry, when *the political* becomes visible precisely because its normative foundations are strained, contested, or denied. It is in these situations that legitimacy must be actively produced, justified, and negotiated - making them privileged sites for a history of *the political* in Rosanvallon's sense.

Rosanvallon's proposal for the renewal of political history is part of a longer historiographical process whose genesis can be traced to the 1920s and 1930s, when Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch led the critique of the so-called *histoire événementielle* in the historiographical arena. Indeed, these founders of the *École des Annales* made use of negative judgments regarding "old political history" in order to build a new historiographical current more focused on human interaction and social structures than on events and political actors (Burke, 1980, p. 19–23). However, rather than disrupting political history entirely, this debate crucially fomented its renovation. Hence, between the 1950s and the 1970s, with the strengthening of the social sciences, scholars such as Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort, among others, developed theoretical and methodological paths capable of responding to the critiques advanced by those who sustained the *Annales* tradition. This renovating march continued beyond the 1970s with authors such as Reinhart Koselleck, Pierre Bourdieu, René Rémond, and Pierre Rosanvallon himself, whose works on *l'intérêt croissant pour la philosophie*



politique and *l'histoire conceptuelle du politique* have been particularly influential since the 1980s (Rosanvallon, 1986, p. 93–105).

Although Rosanvallon's intervention is situated within this lineage, his contribution is distinguished by a specific epistemological wager: that *the political* becomes most intelligible in moments of rupture, tension, and uncertainty. As he argues, "the background of *the political* only allows itself to be truly grasped in those moments and situations that demonstrate that the life of democracy is not the confrontation with an ideal model, but the exploration of a problem to be solved" (Rosanvallon, 2010, p. 86). Such moments expose the normative foundations of collective life and therefore constitute privileged sites for a history of *the political* grounded in *globalizing analysis*.

From Rosanvallon's proposal for a hermeneutic enlargement of political history emerges an interdependent conceptual binomial: the distinction between politics and *the political*, inseparable from the vitality of a *globalizing analysis*. Rather than treating these as abstract methodological claims, this article mobilizes them through an empirical problematic: the final phase of the diplomatic negotiations that led to the formation of Brazil's northern boundaries, particularly the arbitration dispute with the United Kingdom, best known in Brazil's diplomatic history as the Pirara Question (1904). When approached from this perspective, Pirara constitutes a privileged analytical site in which *the political* becomes visible under conditions of asymmetry, tension, and contested legitimacy.

The structure of the article follows the analytical movement proposed by Rosanvallon's distinction between politics and *the political*. It begins by reconstructing the Pirara Question through a deliberately factual and event-centered narrative, not as an end in itself, but as a point of contrast against which the limits of an *histoire événementielle* approach can be assessed. This initial reconstruction provides the empirical surface upon which the subsequent hermeneutic enlargement operates.

The second part shifts the focus from narrative to conceptual analysis, examining the breadth of *the political* in contrast to politics and clarifying why its intelligibility cannot be captured through institutional or event-based accounts alone. The final part mobilizes my reading of Rosanvallon's notion of *globalizing analysis*, demonstrating how contributions from fields such as conceptual history, political theory, philosophy, and sociology function as analytical instruments that allow the historian to reconstruct the normative, symbolic, and legitimacy-based dimensions of political action.

Rather than seeking to exhaust the analytical possibilities opened by Rosanvallon's framework, this article advances two interconnected claims: first, that the distinction between politics and *the political* is inseparable from a *globalizing analysis* of collective life; and second, that such an approach significantly expands the analytical resources available to historians. By mobilizing



contributions from fields beyond history as analytical instruments, the article demonstrates how *the political* can be reconstructed in its normative, symbolic, and legitimacy-based dimensions. Because *the political* constitutes a symbolic and normative totality, its historical reconstruction cannot be confined to narrative history alone, requiring analytical tools drawn from conceptual, philosophical, and sociological approaches.

It is in this sense that the Pirara Question (1904) provides a privileged empirical point of entry. As a boundary arbitration conducted under conditions of profound asymmetry, it offers an opportunity to examine how legitimacy, sovereignty, and political meaning were negotiated within an unequal imperial order. The following section therefore begins with a factual reconstruction of the Pirara dispute, which serves as the empirical surface against which the *globalizing analysis of the political* will unfold.

The Pirara Question: a *sui generis* event

On July 6, 1904, the Italian king Victor Emmanuel III concluded the arbitration award that settled the boundary dispute between Brazil and the United Kingdom over the region known as Pirara, in the borderlands between Brazil and British Guiana. The award granted approximately sixty percent of the contested territory to the Britons and was formally communicated on July 14 to the British ambassador and to Joaquim Nabuco, head of the Brazilian Special Mission (Menck, 2009, p. 47). The award marked Brazil's sole territorial loss in the series of boundary arbitrations conducted during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it exposed the limits of Brazil's reliance on legal arbitration within an imperial international order structured by profound asymmetries of power (Doratioto, 2017, p. 152).

Far from constituting merely a diplomatic setback, the Pirara decision functioned as a political rupture: it compelled Brazilian diplomacy to confront the tension between formal sovereignty, juridical equality, and the unequal conditions under which legitimacy was recognized among states during the high imperial era. It is within this context that Brazil's subsequent efforts to recalibrate its international alignments - particularly through a closer relationship with the United States in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War - must be understood.

The American victory in the Spanish-American War (1898) marked a reconfiguration of power relations in the Western Hemisphere and altered the practical meaning of the Monroe Doctrine. In the early twentieth century, this transformation was formalized through the Roosevelt Corollary, leading to the United States' several interventions in the region in the name of order and stability (Kissinger, 2012, pp. 19–22). Yet, this shift did not merely expand U.S. influence; it reshaped the normative framework within which political authority and legitimacy were recognized in the Americas.



Within this context, Brazil's rapprochement with the United States following the Pirara arbitration must be understood as a strategic recalibration rather than a simple reaction to territorial loss. Since the 1870s, the United States had been Brazil's important commercial partner, particularly as the largest importer of Brazilian coffee (Doratioto; Vidigal, 2014, p. 46). The decision to strengthen political ties in the aftermath of the arbitration award reflected an effort to anchor Brazil's international legitimacy within a hemispheric order increasingly structured by U.S. power. This shift was symbolically and institutionally marked on June 12, 1904 - two days before the award was formally communicated - when the Baron of Rio Branco invited Joaquim Nabuco to lead Brazil's embassy in Washington (Mello, 2006, p. 552). With his acceptance, Nabuco became Brazil's first ambassador to the United States - indeed the first from any Latin American country - signaling a redefinition of the country's diplomatic orientation.

Extending from the late imperial period into the First Republic, the Pirara controversy thus intersected with broader processes of Brazilian state formation. More than a boundary dispute, it became part of the historical negotiation through which Brazil sought to define its sovereignty, legitimacy, and place within an evolving international order.

Until the 1830s, Brazil and the United Kingdom had not engaged in explicit diplomatic disputes over the borders between the former and British Guiana (Doratioto; Vidigal, 2014, p. 14). In practice, both British and Dutch authorities acknowledged that the river systems forming the Rio Branco River - including the Pirara River - lay within Brazilian territory. Conversely, Brazilian authorities recognized British control over regions drained by the Essequibo and Courantyne rivers, which flow directly into the Atlantic rather than into the Amazon basin (Goes Filho, 2013, p. 102).

This relative stability was disrupted in 1836, when the German-born explorer Robert Hermann Schomburgk, acting under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society, undertook a survey of the region and proposed a new boundary line - later known as the *Schomburgk Line* - that extended British claims into areas previously treated as Brazilian. Although initially presented as a scientific demarcation, the line was subsequently adopted by British authorities as the *de facto* border of British Guiana (Menck, 2009, p. 25; 51). This redefinition of territorial claims generated prolonged disputes not only with Brazil but also with Venezuela, which confronted similar British assertions in the Guiana region. The precedent was set on October 3, 1899, when an arbitration tribunal in Paris ruled decisively in favor of the United Kingdom in its border dispute with Venezuela (Menck, 2009, p. 357).

Within Brazil's domestic context, allegations that Indigenous populations in the Pirara region were being detained or mistreated circulated in British diplomatic and missionary discourse during the late 1830s. These claims - advanced with the support of Robert Hermann Schomburgk - were mobilized in London as humanitarian justifications for intervention, contributing to the establishment



of the Protestant mission led by Thomas Youd in the Pirara area and its further military protection by the Britons. Framed as a civilizing and protective endeavor, the mission also functioned as a means of consolidating British presence in a contested territory (Menck, 2009, p. 27; 31).

This advance coincided with a moment of acute political instability within Brazil. The Cabanagem rebellion (1835–1840) absorbed much of *the political* and military attention of the provincial authorities in Grão-Pará, significantly weakening the state's capacity to monitor and defend its northern frontier. Although one among several uprisings during the Regency period, the Cabanagem was exceptional in its scale and duration, as insurgent forces succeeded in controlling the province for approximately nine months (Basile, 2016, p. 219). The conjunction of internal disorder and external pressure thus created a structural opening through which British initiatives in the Pirara region could advance with limited resistance.

At the same time, reports of the presence of precious metals in the region intensified Brazilian concerns regarding British intentions in the Pirara area. Within this context of mounting tension, the Protestant mission led by Thomas Youd - established in 1838 - became a focal point of dispute. In 1840, provincial authorities in Grão-Pará ordered its removal, dispatching a Brazilian detachment under the authority of Brigadier Francisco José de Souza Soares de Andréia. The operation, however, was interrupted when British forces advancing from British Guiana signaled their numerical superiority, compelling the Brazilian detachment to withdraw (Doratioto, 2017, p. 153).

The episode underscored the imbalance of power on the ground and exposed the limits of Brazil's capacity to enforce its claims through force. In response to this impasse, and in order to prevent further escalation, the disputed territory was declared neutral in 1842. Neutralization thus emerged not as a resolution of sovereignty, but as a provisional political arrangement shaped by asymmetrical power relations.

The period of neutrality lasted from 1842 to 1899, when Brazil and the United Kingdom agreed to submit the controversy to arbitration. During this period, however, neutrality was repeatedly contested. Brazilian authorities accused British agents of enabling traders to settle in the region in order to influence Indigenous populations, whereas British officials alleged that Brazil imprisoned Indigenous groups and attempted to establish agricultural settlements in the disputed area (Menck, 2009, p. 423).

In 1901, the recently crowned king of Italy, Victor Emmanuel III, was appointed as referee of the controversy. Despite the extensive Brazilian legal defense - compiled in eighteen volumes under the direction of Joaquim Nabuco (*Memórias, Contra-memórias e Documentos Anexos*) - the arbitration award issued in 1904 granted the majority of the disputed territory to the United Kingdom (Nabuco, 1941). Of the 33,200 square kilometers under arbitration, 19,630 were awarded to British



Guiana (Doratioto; Vidigal, 2014, p. 45).

The Pirara arbitration did not merely represent a territorial loss; it exposed a deeper tension in Brazil's political self-understanding - namely, the contradiction between formal sovereignty as a nation-state and the unequal conditions under which sovereignty was recognized within the imperial international order. Moreover, the controversy unfolded during a period of marked socio-political fragility in Brazil and extended across a decisive phase of national identity formation.

Periods of crisis are moments in which political structures become particularly visible, precisely because their foundations are strained. Such moments are shaped by an inescapable "ascendant temporal pressure" that forces historical actors to confront uncertainty and limitation (Koselleck, 2020, p. 225). It is under these exceptional conditions - when legitimacy, authority, and collective orientation are no longer taken for granted - that *the political*, in Rosanvallon's sense, becomes most intelligible. For this reason, the resolution of the Pirara Controversy marks a moment in which *the political* becomes particularly legible, making it possible to move from narrative reconstruction to conceptual analysis.

A globalizing-analysis substantive: *the political* is politics, but not the other way around

In light of Rosanvallon's proposal, it is essential to clarify the distinction between *the political* and politics. For that, *the political* can only be grasped through a *globalizing analysis*, articulated through two analytical dimensions: *field and work*. As a field, *the political* designates the space in which social relations unfold, allowing one to apprehend "the multiple threads in the lives of men and women". As work, it engenders the process through which a human conglomerate acquires idiosyncrasies "of a true community", a structure enabled by the heterogeneous process "of elaboration of explicit or implicit rules on the participable and the shareable, which shape the life of the *polis*" (Rosanvallon, 2010, p. 72). From this perspective, *the political* clearly exceeds the domain of politics, which constitutes only one of its expressions.

When substantively speaking about *the political*, I qualify it, thus, both as a modality of common life existence and a form of collective action that is implicitly distinguished from the exercise of politics. Referring *the political*, not politics, is talking about the power of law, the State and the nation, equality and justice, identity and difference, citizenship and civility; in short, it is talking about everything that constitutes the *polis* beyond the immediate field of party competition for the exercise of power, the day-to-day governmental action and the ordinary life of the institutions (Rosanvallon, 2010, p. 73).



When grounded in Rosanvallon's analytical framework, historical inquiry expands beyond the reconstruction of *des événements* to address deeper mechanisms of political intelligibility. For Rosanvallon, the history of *the political* is indispensable because it enables the historian to elucidate power relations that operate at levels not immediately visible, shaping the plurality of intentions, expectations, and constraints that structure collective life.

First of all, a proposal with a similar spirit, the history of *the political* is distinguished, thus, given its very object, from the history of politics itself. Besides the reconstruction of the chronological succession and the events, the latter analyses the functioning of institutions, dissects public-decision-making mechanisms, interprets the results of election polls, sheds light on the actor's reasons and on the system of their interactions and describes the rites and symbols that organize life. The history of *the political* evidently embodies these different contributions; however, what it entails of subaltern battles, rivalry between people, intellectual confusions, short-term calculations, *stricto sensu* political activity, it is, indeed, what, at the same time, limitates and allows, practically, the achievement of *the political*. It is, at the same time, a screen and a way (Rosanvallon, 2010, p. 78).

Historical inquiry, Rosanvallon argues, should not be limited to "appreciating the weight of heritages and clarifying the present in light of the past." Instead, it must seek to "rebuild the way through which individuals and groups elaborated their understanding of their situations" (Rosanvallon, 2010, p. 76). This position does not reject historical exemplarity. On the contrary, this position resonates with Christian Bouton's discussion of the transformations of *historia magistra vitae* in modern historical thought, showing how appeals to past experience persist in historiography without functioning as fixed models or prescriptive lessons (Bouton, 2019, p. 183–215).

Rosanvallon's proposal for renewing political history therefore does not consist in abandoning events, but in refusing to treat them as self-sufficient explanations. The aim is to promote a hermeneutic enlargement capable of grasping *the political* as the space in which collective life is organized, contested, and rendered meaningful. From this perspective, I argue that the task of the historian also involves reconstructing the range of possibilities, constraints, and interpretations available to historical actors, including paths that were conceivable but ultimately not taken - and that, had they been taken, might have altered the course of history. These possibilities belong to the sphere of *the political*. The history of life in the polis cannot be explained solely through sequences of outcomes, ups and downs, but through the meanders, attending to the configurations of interests, asymmetries, and normative constraints that structure *the political* - hence the necessity of a



globalizing analysis.

"The background of *the political* only presents itself in situations of fracture, discomfort, and tension; it emerges in moments of denial" (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 87). It is under such conditions that *the political* becomes analytically legible. Building on Rosanvallon's historiographical framework, the analysis that follows adopts this perspective in order to advance a hermeneutic approach to political history that moves beyond event-centered narration. In doing so, it establishes a conceptual contrast with the preceding section (*The Pirara Question: a *sui generis* event*), shifting the focus from narrative reconstruction to the conditions under which political meaning and legitimacy are constituted.

A crucial dimension of the distinction between *the political* and politics lies in the binomials through which the former operates: *equality–justice* and *identity–difference* (Rosanvallon, 2010, p. 73). Viewed through this lens, the study of Brazil's boundary formation reveals significant heterogeneity in power relations, depending on the actors involved, at least on two interconnected levels: regional and global. From a globalizing perspective, Brazilian foreign policy during this period cannot be dissociated from the imperialist international order, which reached its peak in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Between 1870 and 1890, European control over the African continent expanded from approximately 10 percent to 90 percent of its territory, exemplifying the dynamics of the so-called scramble for Africa. After 1890, informal modes of domination increasingly combined with formal territorial control, giving imperialism a multifaceted character (Döpcke, 2007, p. 100–103). These two contexts - power asymmetries and the imperialist order - decisively shaped the outcomes of Brazil's boundary negotiations.

The process that concluded Brazil's boundary formation was largely carried out during the First Republic, and Brazilian foreign policy consistently took into account the asymmetric relations among states and negotiators. The history of these negotiations shows that, depending on the prevailing balance of power, Brazilian diplomacy mobilized two legal rationales and two corresponding negotiation strategies, which were not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, when Portuguese occupation beyond the *Tordesillas line* was sufficiently established to justify territorial expansion beyond the limits set by the *Treaty of Santo Ildefonso* (1777), Brazilian diplomats privileged the principle of *uti possidetis* - may one continue to possess such as one does possess¹. On the other hand, in cases where such occupation was less pronounced, they tended to defend the boundaries

¹ The legal principle *uti possidetis* was established as a cornerstone in Brazilian diplomacy after 1849, during José Paulino Soares de Souza's second role as minister of Foreign Affairs. Nonetheless, the principle had first been used by Alexandre de Gusmão when negotiating the Treaty of Madrid between Portugal and Spain (1750). It was the diplomat Duarte da Ponte Ribeiro who rescued the principle when negotiating Brazil's limits with Amazon countries in the 1850s. GOES FILHO, Synesio Sampaio. *As Fronteiras do Brasil*. Brasília: Funag, 2013.



defined at Santo Ildefonso itself, particularly from the second half of the nineteenth century onward.

Furthermore, in situations where the asymmetry of power favored Brazil, as in the negotiations with Paraguay following the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870), Brazilian diplomacy opted for direct negotiation. As *Synesio Sampaio Goes Filho* notes, prior to the war there were widespread expectations that boundary demarcation with Paraguay would prove extremely difficult (Goes Filho, 2013, p. 82). The outcome of the conflict - often described as the bloodiest war in South American history - significantly altered this balance in Brazil's favor, facilitating the direct negotiation of the Treaty of Limits in 1872. Brazilian influence over Paraguayan politics persisted well beyond the war, extending until 1904, when the Liberal Revolution marked a rupture with Brazil's sphere of influence (Doratioto, 2015, p. 283).

Conversely, in contexts where the asymmetry of power disfavored Brazil, as in the Pirara Question (1904), arbitration emerged as the preferred means of settlement. In 1840, the United Kingdom possessed almost as many naval vessels as all other states combined, making it the dominant naval power of the period (Hobsbawm, 2017, p. 175). Although this position gradually eroded in the transition to the twentieth century - up to the Great War - with the rise of Germany and the United States as influential powers in Latin America, Britain remained Brazil's principal trading partner and military supplier during the First Republic. Under these conditions, direct negotiation with the United Kingdom would have placed Brazilian diplomacy under considerable pressure, reinforcing arbitration as a politically viable alternative.

In this context of alterities - marked by inequality among actors due to asymmetries in power, and injustice in the negotiating processes, given the absence of a homogeneous scale capable of balancing interests - it is possible to identify two structural levels of power.² The first is the global level of imperial expansion, in which powers such as France and the United Kingdom held clear advantages in negotiations.³ The second is the regional level, where Brazil's relative position varied depending on the counterpart involved. It was within this configuration that Brazilian diplomacy recurrently resorted to arbitration: in the Palmas Question against Argentina, resolved in 1895 by U.S. President Grover Cleveland; in the Amapá Question against France, settled in 1900 by Walter Hauser, President of the Swiss Federal Council; and in the Pirara Question against the United Kingdom (Goes Filho, 2015). Despite the asymmetries of power between Brazil and its counterparts,

2 Regarding attributes of power, I refer to Hans Morgenthau's thought. MORGENTHAU, Hans J. *Política entre as nações: a luta pelo poder e pela paz*. Tradução Oswaldo Biato. Brasília: Editora Universidade de Brasília: Imprensa Oficial do Estado de São Paulo: Instituto de Pesquisa de Relações Internacionais, 2003.

3 Eric Hobsbawm points to the fact that, concerning the amount of land owned by States on the imperialism stage, France and the United Kingdom benefited the most. While the former grew its lands by 9 million square kilometers, the latter grew by 10 million square kilometers. HOBSBAWM, Eric John. *A era dos impérios: 1975-1914*. 23. ed. Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2017. p. 96, 128.



the first two arbitrations were resolved in Brazil's favor.

In the case of Argentina, it is plausible to conclude that the attributes of power favored Buenos Aires rather than Rio de Janeiro, which helps explain Brazil's recourse to arbitration. In the early years of the First Republic, Brazilian foreign policy toward Argentina was shaped by trade negotiations, close monitoring of Argentina's naval modernization, and concern over the possibility of Argentine regional hegemony. This context was particularly unfavorable to Brazil, whose navy had been weakened since the *Revolta da Armada* (1891-94), while Argentina invested heavily in armaments amid tensions with Chile (Bueno, 2017, p. 182). Moreover, Argentina's international standing exceeded that of Brazil. By the end of the nineteenth century, Argentina's per capita income surpassed 2,700 U.S. dollars, whereas Brazil's stood at approximately 700 dollars (Doratioto, 2014, p. 73).

It is also important to stress that Brazil's primary concerns regarding imperial expansion did not center on the United States at the time, but rather on France and the United Kingdom. France was Brazil's counterpart in the Amapá boundary dispute, which was resolved in 1900 in Brazil's favor. The United Kingdom, in turn, occupied Trindade Island in 1895 and was Brazil's opponent in the Pirara controversy, from which Brazil would only be free in 1904 (Garcia, 2018, pp. 138, 143, 147).

In the case of the Amapá Question, the Baron of Rio Branco, Brazil's chancellor, supported recourse to arbitration on the grounds that direct negotiation would not yield more favorable demarcation terms than those already on the table, especially given that the dispute involved "one of the superpowers of the period" (Goes Filho, 2015, p. 319). As for the Pirara Question, the impossibility of compelling the leading power of the time likewise shaped Brazil's strategy, leading it to accept a prolonged state of neutrality of 57 years until both states ultimately agreed to arbitration.

No less important, in the early twentieth century even in situations where Brazil held relative primacy in the balance of power, as in the Acre Question, it did not act unilaterally⁴. In that case, Brazil's most consequential action leading to the resolution of the dispute - the Treaty of Petrópolis (1903) - was only possible after negotiations with the United States and the payment of indemnities to the Bolivian Syndicate, led by New York investors. This scenario suggests that, although the

⁴ What today is Brazil's state of Acre used to belong to Bolivia. As a matter of fact, Puerto Alonso even hosted a Brazilian consulate. Brazil was mostly concerned that Bolivia could eventually pass the region to the hands of foreign countries and private companies. Such a concern was materialized in 1901, when the administration of the area was awarded to the Bolivian Syndicate of New York, an enterprise aimed at extracting rubber. The negotiation between Bolivia and the syndicate was fomented by both the United States and the United Kingdom. The final solution was possible thanks to the military occupation of the region by Brazil along with the payment of 100,000 pounds sterling to the syndicate and 2 million pounds sterling to Bolivia, which also received a tiny piece of territory occupied by Bolivians in exchange. GOES FILHO, Synesio Sampaio. *As Fronteiras do Brasil*. Brasília: Funag, 2013, 108-119.



United States did not exercise "great interference" in the region during this period, it nonetheless remained embedded within the broader dynamics of imperialism in the Americas (Döpcke, 2007, p. 105).

Beyond its strategic dimension, recourse to arbitration functioned not merely as a diplomatic instrument, but as a political grammar through which Brazil sought to affirm its status as a legitimate member of the international community. By accepting arbitration - even under unfavorable conditions - Brazil articulated a conception of legitimacy grounded in legal rationality rather than force, thereby expressing a specific understanding of *the political* foundations of international order.

As this analysis has shown so far, it is widely recognized in historiography that a broad analytical perspective is necessary to apprehend the space in which political action unfolds. The Pirara Question, for instance, cannot be understood solely through bilateral relations between Brazil and the United Kingdom. Expanding the analytical horizon allows the historian to situate the problem within denser configurations of power and meaning, often leading beyond the immediate conjuncture of the dispute itself. However, this kind of enlargement should not be conflated with what Rosanvallon defines as a *globalizing analysis*. His proposal does not rest on the mere expansion of contextual scope or the mapping of power relations at different scales - important as these may be - but on the reconstruction of *the political* as a normative and symbolic configuration.

Major political phenomena cannot be explained without a global vision. Thus, "it would not be possible, for example, to comprehend the structural stability of a regime solely by reporting on ministerial crises occurring in the visible foreground of political life" (Rosanvallon, 2010, p. 79). However, this should not be confused with a mere enlargement of geographical scale or the accumulation of contextual layers. A *globalizing analysis* must therefore go beyond the observation of overt power relations to reconstruct the less visible processes through which political meaning, legitimacy, and authority are produced. Such an endeavor, I argue, requires analytical contributions that exceed the limits of event-centered narration and draw on insights from other fields of knowledge. In what follows, these contributions are mobilized not as external supplements, but as analytical instruments for deepening the theoretical and methodological discussion proposed here.

A needed *globalizing analysis*

Omitting weakens the narrative

A *globalizing analysis* requires making explicit the conditions of intelligibility through which political action becomes meaningful, rather than merely reconstructing outcomes or sequences of events. What weakens political history, in this sense, is not analytical complexity, but the omission of politically relevant possibilities that structured action, judgment, and legitimacy.



The work of Ernest Hemingway offers a heuristic clarification of why omission carries epistemic consequences, thereby illustrating the analytical value of contributions from fields beyond history without displacing the historical method itself. In *A Moveable Feast*, published posthumously in 1964, Hemingway observes that "the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood" (Hemingway, 2010, p. 69). Although this reflection concerns literary composition, it points to a broader insight: narrative density is not exhausted by what is explicitly stated, but is often structured by what remains implicit. The richness of a narrative, in this sense, resides in its meanders - in the range of latent possibilities and tensions that are not immediately visible, yet decisively shape intelligibility.

Carlos Baker, one of the foremost interpreters of Hemingway's work, famously described this narrative strategy as the "iceberg theory." According to Baker, what is immediately visible to the reader - the summit of the iceberg - represents only a small fraction of the narrative structure, while its densest and most consequential elements remain submerged, operating below the surface of direct perception (Baker, 1972, p. 117).

When transposed as an analytical analogy, this image helps clarify the distinction between politics and *the political*. Politics corresponds to the visible summit: the domain of institutions, decisions, conflicts, and explicit power struggles. *The political*, by contrast, encompasses the entire iceberg - especially its submerged mass - where social relations, normative assumptions, asymmetries, and conditions of legitimacy operate at levels that are not immediately observable. It is this submerged dimension - the largest portion of an iceberg - that stabilizes, conditions, and enables what becomes visible as politics.

This dialogue with Hemingway, however, also brings into relief a fundamental difference between literary narrative and political history. In Hemingway's writing, the submerged portion of the narrative is deliberately entrusted to the reader, and its effectiveness depends on the author's precise control over what is revealed and what is omitted. Since the author knows what is being omitted or could be omitted for the benefit of a given goal, this action could only strengthen the storytelling. As Teodora Domotor notes, Hemingway refined his technique in order to guide the reader through stories dense with events and personal relations while using language as sparingly as possible (Domotor, 2012, p. 15).

Yet, precisely at this point, political history must invert Hemingway's narrative logic: while literary omission may enrich fiction, the omission of politically relevant contexts and possibilities weakens historical explanation. For this reason, the historian cannot rely only on the reader to reconstruct what remains unsaid, but must instead assume responsibility for making explicit *the politically relevant contexts, constraints, and possibilities that structured past action*.

In the construction of a fictional narrative, leaving space for the reader to conjecture



outcomes and possibilities is a constitutive element of literary meaning. In political history, however - whose analytical object is a real historical conjuncture structured by ethical and moral paradigms - such freedom must be handled with caution.⁵ The historian's task is to reconstruct the meanderings of political action by identifying the range of possibilities available to historical actors, while simultaneously acknowledging the inexorable passage of time.

As Reinhart Koselleck emphasizes, historical inquiry must remain conscious of the impossibility of returning to the event itself: "the attempt to circumscribe time represents a huge effort of linguistic abstraction, for time always escapes visible perception," and no concept can ever be "genuinely historical," since it necessarily operates through metaphor (Koselleck, 2020, pp. 71–72). Precisely because full recovery of the past is impossible, selective omission in historical writing carries epistemic and ethical weight. The limits of representation do not absolve the historian from the responsibility of explicitness; on the contrary, they heighten the obligation to make politically relevant possibilities as visible as the sources allow.

Bearing this impossibility in mind, what must be emphasized is that the historian's task is to make explicit - through writing - the range of politically relevant possibilities that structured a given historical conjuncture. Only once these meanderings of *the political* are rendered visible can the reader meaningfully develop their own interpretive judgment. Excessive economy of language or the omission of contextual connections risks producing an image of the past that misrepresents what could plausibly have occurred.

For this reason, the historian must assume responsibility for articulating the field of possibilities as fully as the sources allow, even when those possibilities point toward analytical paths that were never realized. Here, methodological honesty does not consist in claiming exhaustive knowledge, but in resisting omission where it would distort intelligibility.

Understanding the Pirara Question through the lens of *the political* requires recognizing that its chronology unfolded within a global system of interests structured by imperialism. A *globalizing analysis* therefore demands that the historian make explicit the power configurations that shaped how decisions became intelligible and legitimate as possible. If *the political* must be reconstructed through the conditions under which judgment and authority were produced, then the position of the Italian referee cannot be treated as external to the dispute. In this sense, contrary to Hemingway's literary economy, omitting relevant contexts and possibilities would only weaken historical explanation.

The rise of imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century produced an international

⁵ See ASSIS, Arthur Alfaix. Objectivity and the First Law of History Writing. In.: Journal of the Philosophy of History, 13, 1, 2019, p. 107-128.



order in which a limited number of states dictated the distribution of power and spheres of influence, sometimes collectively, as in the Open Door policy⁶ and the Berlin Conference (1884–85).⁷ From the bilateral decision to submit the dispute to arbitration in 1899 until the issuance of the award in 1904, Italy remained actively engaged in imperial expansion, particularly through efforts to consolidate possessions in Africa and to secure a strategic base in China.⁸

Between 1876 and 1914, roughly a quarter of the world's continental surface was shared or reshared as colonies among a small number of states, driven largely by the expansion of global trade networks (Hobsbawm, 2017, pp. 97–108). Italian diplomatic documentation from this period reveals persistent unease within the foreign service regarding Italy's subordinate position vis-à-vis the powers leading this imperial endeavor. Viewed through Rosanvallon's analytical binomials - equality and justice, identity and difference - this context exposes the absence of real equality among states, despite the rhetoric of collective imperial coordination exemplified by the Berlin Conference.

Italy's efforts to secure support from the German Empire, its ally in the Triple Alliance since 1882, were repeatedly met with caution (Döpcke, 2007, p. 92). German officials routinely warned that intensified Italian colonial ambitions could strain Italy's economy (Döpcke, 2007, p. 92). This hesitation is explicit in a telegram sent on January 13, 1899, by Lanza, the Italian ambassador in Berlin, to Italy's Foreign Minister Carvenaro, in which he notes German concern over the financial costs of Italian expansion and concludes that Berlin would not openly support Italy's bid for a base in China. For this reason, Lanza remarked that he would not try again to break Bernhard von Bülow's silence on the matter.⁹

6 The American possessions in Eastern Asia and in the Pacific can only be analysed when regarded in relation to the United States' intention toward the Chinese market. The American possession over the Philippines, Wake, and Guam, as well Hawaii, in 1898, can only be comprehended under the aegis of the so-called open door policy. DÖPCKE, Wolfgang. Apogeu e colapso do sistema internacional europeu (1871-1918). In: SARAIVA, Jose Sombra. (Org.). História das relações internacionais contemporâneas: da sociedade internacional do século XIX à era da globalização. São Paulo: Saraiva, 2007, p. 107.

7 On the one hand, Wolfgang Döpcke defends that the Berlin Conference, which happened between 1884 and 1885, and in which the whole group of European superpowers plus the United States participated, did not occur for the sharing the of African continent, but to keep free-trade in the Congo basin, which was disputed by Portugal, France, the United Kingdom and Belgium. Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, on the other hand, emphasizes that, although the intentions focused on the free navigation across the Niger and Benue rivers, after the Conference, the scramble for Africa worsened. Ibidem, 2007, p. 100; UZOIGWE, Godfrey N. Partilha europeia e conquista da África: apanhado geral. In.: História Geral da África, VII: África sob dominação colonial, 1880-1935. 2. ed. Rev. Brasília: UNESCO, 2010, p. 33.

8 According to Monday B. Akpan, the genesis of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia dates back to 1869, when Giuseppe Sapeto, an Italian from Lazaro, buys the port of Assab from a sultan, in the Red Sea, for the amount of 6,000 tâleres of Maria Teresa. In 1882, the port was declared an Italian colony. AKPAN, Monday B. Libéria e Etiópia, 1880-1914: a sobrevivência de dois Estados africanos. In.: História Geral da África, VII: África sob dominação colonial, 1880-1935. 2. ed. Brasília: UNESCO, 2010, p. 299.

9 Ministero degli Affari Esteri. Diplomatic Documentation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy. Telegram between the ambassador in Berlin, Lanza, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Canevaro. Document n. 138. In: I Documenti Diplomatici



In the meantime, Umberto I, then king of Italy, sought to rebalance Italy's position within the imperial order by strengthening ties with the United Kingdom. Only ten days after the telegram sent from Berlin, the Italian ambassador in London, De Rezis, reported having received Lord Salisbury's approval for an Italian port in China on the condition that Italy would not pass the port onto any other State.¹⁰ Yet, within the uneven hierarchy of the Open Door framework, the first concessions granted by China benefited France and Britain, and Umberto I did not live to see the establishment of the Italian site in Tientsin (today's Tianjin), which occurred only in 1901, during the reign of Victor Emmanuel III. Moreover, British support for Italy's ambitions in China remained conditional and tightly circumscribed.

From the perspective proposed by Rosanvallon, this configuration reveals a shared imperial identity without power homogeneity: although the rhetoric of justice and coordination was articulated through forums such as the Berlin Conference, relations among imperial powers remained marked by profound inequality.

It is therefore essential that the historian reconstruct the trajectories through which past power relations unfolded and render visible the range of possibilities available to historical actors. Making these possibilities intelligible - especially those that, had they materialized, might have altered historical outcomes - is not only analytically productive but also an ethical obligation of historical inquiry. From this perspective, examining the conjuncture in which the referee who resolved the Pirara Question was selected becomes methodologically useful.

After the assassination of his father, Victor Emmanuel III - the only son and heir of Umberto I - ascended the Italian throne in July 1900, assuming a role that would soon place him at the center of Italian foreign policy (Menck, 2009, pp. 365-374). By accepting the position of referee in the Pirara Question in October 1901, Victor Emmanuel III entered a diplomatic terrain already familiar to the Italian crown and broadly aligned with British interests. In 1897, Umberto I had acted as referee - through Paul Honoré Vigliani, then minister of state and senator - in a boundary dispute between Portugal and the United Kingdom over Rhodesia. More broadly, Italy's imperial ambitions in Africa were deeply dependent on British support. Although Italy succeeded in establishing control over Eritrea in 1889 and formalized its claims through the Treaty of Wuchale - momentarily designating Ethiopia as Italian Abyssinia - this expansion was made possible largely through London's backing (Akpan, 2010). The subsequent Italian defeat by Menelik II in 1895 and the Treaty of Addis Ababa (1896) curtailed these ambitions and isolated Italy diplomatically in the region, but they did not

Italiani, terza serie, v. III.

10 Ministero degli Affari Esteri. Diplomatic documentation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy. Telegram between the ambassador in London, De Renzis, and the Foreign Minister, Canevaro. Document n. 140. In: I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani, terza serie, v. III.



dissolve Italy's structural proximity to the United Kingdom within the imperial order.

Within the imperial context, Victor Emmanuel III inherited not only the Italian throne but also a relationship of structural dependence on the United Kingdom, a fact that explains why his nomination as referee was criticized with suspicion in Brazil. On July 7, 1899, João Arthur de Souza Corrêa, Brazil's representative in London, consulted Lord Salisbury, then British foreign secretary, regarding possible candidates for the arbitration (Menck, 2009, p. 196). The British government favored submitting the dispute to an arbitration court, a solution that Brazil viewed with apprehension, given the recent experience of Venezuela, whose claims against British Guiana had been entirely rejected by an Anglo-American arbitration tribunal in Paris on October 3, 1899 - following the demarcation of the *Schomburgk Line* (Menck, 2009, p. 199).

During these discussions, alternative referees were considered, including King Oscar II of Sweden, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, and Pope Leo XIII, all of whom were rejected by Lord Salisbury. As Mascarenhas Menck shows, British reluctance stemmed in particular from concerns that Germany might exert influence over a future award. Salisbury nevertheless accepted Brazil's proposal of the Grand Duke of Baden, but only after ensuring that he was not politically aligned with the German Kaiser (Menck, 2009, p. 196).

The Baron of Rio Branco initially viewed the nomination of the Grand Duke of Baden favorably, noting that the case could be "studied by the professors of Heidelberg, to whom, naturally, the grand duke would certainly look for support" (Menck, 2009, p. 196). Nevertheless, because the Grand Duke was not a sovereign but a princely ruler connected to the German Empire, his nomination conflicted with Brazil's diplomatic tradition of appointing fully sovereign heads of state as referees in arbitration disputes. For this reason, Olyntho de Magalhães, then minister of Foreign Relations, rejected the nomination.

The situation became diplomatically awkward when Brazil withdrew the name after it had already been accepted by King Edward VII of England. This reversal placed Brazilian diplomacy in the delicate position of refusing a referee it had itself proposed. Pressed by the need to resolve the controversy, Brazil ultimately accepted Victor Emmanuel III as referee, thereby narrowing its room for maneuver at a decisive moment of the arbitration process.

The Italian king was selected from a list of three names proposed by Brazil at the request of the British government (Menck, 2009, p. 213). Given this restricted pool of alternatives, a *globalizing analysis* requires attention to the range of possibilities available to the historical actors at the moment of decision. Clarifying the *political* positions and interests associated with each potential referee is therefore analytically relevant, even when definitive answers cannot be reached. Within the limits imposed by space and sources, it nonetheless remains legitimate to ask how the arbitration might have unfolded had the Grand Duke of Baden or another candidate been selected - an exercise that



underscores how contingent political outcomes were shaped by constrained choices rather than inevitability.

This analysis has shown that *the political* extends beyond treaties, party competition, and governmental action, operating across personal relations, hierarchical structures, and interstate configurations. Rendering visible the range of possibilities available to historical actors is therefore not optional but constitutive of political intelligibility. Attending to these alternatives - alongside the historian's inevitable inability to recover the past as it was - strengthens historical explanation rather than undermining it.¹¹ At the same time, *the political* also encompasses collective sentiments and affective dispositions that shape power relations in less visible ways. Its limits, in this sense, are inseparable from the limits of human relations within the community itself.

The limits of the actors

The limits faced by historical actors were not merely individual or circumstantial. Concepts such as *patriotism* and *progress* structured the horizon within which action could be conceived as legitimate, shaping how responsibility, sacrifice, and national interest were understood. In this sense, these concepts operated as elements of *the political* itself, delimiting the range of intelligible and acceptable choices available to actors within specific historical conjunctures.

Francis Wolff's reflections on the *polis* help clarify this point. In his discussion of what he terms the "oblivion of politics" - a concern closely aligned with Rosanvallon's - Wolff emphasizes the breadth of *the political* within human relations. For Wolff, *the political* constitutes a large and multiform field that sustains human coexistence and enables civilizational life itself, rather than a restricted domain of institutional or governmental activity.

Saying that the man lives politically is the same as saying that the man could not live isolated, like most of the animals, satisfying himself with equal relations with all members of his specie; also, he could not live in simple family communities bound by biological connections (the ascendants, descendants, and collaterals). The *polis* - by that I mean the very political community - is an entity that tends to conserve its identity and its unity, keeping itself how it is in space, beyond lineages, family groups, and it also tends to keep existing in time through successful generations (Wolff, 2007, p. 60).

¹¹ Reinhart Koselleck emphasizes how impossible it is for one to explain what really happened in the past, which is the reason why, in his point of view, there could not be something like total history. KOSELLECK, Reinhart. História de conceitos: estudos sobre a semântica e a pragmática da linguagem política e social. 1. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto, 2020, p. 19-20.



Wolff's reflections on the polis confirm two elements already present in Rosanvallon's framework. First, *the political*, in its breadth, constitutes an inalienable condition of human coexistence and the very ground upon which the polis is formed. Second, this distinction between *the political* and politics proves analytically fertile, allowing historians to perceive power relations beyond their most visible institutional expressions. Yet Wolff also emphasizes a crucial tension: although the polis is in constant movement, it simultaneously seeks to preserve its continuity and identity over time. This stabilizing impulse introduces the problem of limits within *the political* itself and opens the way to Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the State as an encompassing structure that shapes social relations beyond the sphere conventionally understood as politics.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, although the State is a broad and multifaceted construct that permeates diverse forms of human relations and everyday practices, it also functions as a fundamental limiter. Precisely because it is embedded in social interactions and modes of life, the State shapes the categories through which individuals perceive and understand the world. For this reason, Bourdieu warns that any attempt to define the State risks relying on concepts and modes of thought that are themselves produced by the State.

State is a name that we give to hidden, invisible principles - to designate a kind of god absconditus - of the social order, and, at the same time of both physical and symbolic domination as well as physical and symbolic violence. (...) This illusory reality, but collectively validated by consensus, is the place to where we are headed when we regress from a certain number of phenomena - school diplomas, professional titles or calendar. From regression to regression, we arrive in a place that is the founder of all this. This mysterious reality exists through its effects and its collective beliefs in its existence, which is the principle of these effects (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 24; 27).

Therefore, insofar as individuals are formed within this invisible yet socially validated construct, it is plausible to argue that the interactions constitutive of community life are structured by the State. These implications inevitably shape relations in *the political* sphere, since political action is carried out by individuals who are simultaneously members of a community and subjects molded by state-produced norms and categories. With this in mind, the analysis now returns to the Pirara Question, focusing in particular on the selection of the referee.

Initially, there were no widespread suspicions that the Italian king might favor the United Kingdom in his role as referee. However, doubts emerged after Victor Emmanuel III issued a decision of only two pages against Brazil's legal defense - especially when contrasted with the nearly nine-hundred-page ruling produced by Walter Hauser in the Amapá arbitration between Brazil and France



(Menck, 2009, p. 213). While some historians, including Mascarenhas Menck, have defended the Italian decision as procedurally unblemished, contemporary reactions reveal a more complex political context.

As Menck himself documents, Olyntho de Magalhães - one of the principal opponents of the nomination of the Grand Duke of Baden - argued that Victor Emmanuel III's recent coronation, lack of prior arbitral experience, and desire for international prestige ensured his impartiality. Exemption was further expected, according to Olyntho, due to Italy's economic interests in Brazil (Menck, 2009, p. 214). Yet, precisely because this reasoning rests on assumptions about neutrality detached from broader political constraints, it becomes analytically productive to reverse Olyntho's argument and examine *the political* conditions that may have shaped the referee's position beyond the immediately visible horizon.

Victor Emmanuel III, young and recently crowned, ascended the Italian throne under conditions of considerable political strain. His father had been assassinated in 1900 amid tensions fueled by socialism and republican anarchism (Avelino, 2010). Moreover, since Italian unification in 1870, the kingdom had been marked by persistent irredentist pressures. Within this context, the new monarch was expected to embody the figure of the "patriot" - a concept that becomes analytically central for understanding the limits within which his political action could be conceived and exercised.

According to Reinhart Koselleck, the concept of "patriot" underwent a decisive transformation in the transition to the twentieth century. It could no longer sustain the Kantian, cosmopolitan understanding - rooted in the legacy of the French Revolution - according to which patriotism implied responsibility toward humanity as a whole. Under *the political* and economic conditions of high imperialism, the concept increasingly converged with nationalism (Koselleck, 2020, pp. 229–249). When Victor Emmanuel III accepted the role of referee in the Pirara arbitration, to act as a "patriot" therefore meant, first and foremost, to act in the interest of Italy. Even assuming the formal impartiality of arbitration, this conceptual horizon structured the limits within which political judgment could be exercised, shaping what could plausibly appear as legitimate, responsible, and defensible action.

It is therefore clear that the referee's action was shaped by structural limitations rather than by individual disposition alone. Victor Emmanuel III, despite his sovereign position, acted within constraints produced by his formation as a member of the State and by the normative expectations attached to his role. His decisions, however formally unblemished, were necessarily conditioned by elements beyond his control. These limitations were not unique to the Italian case. They also applied to the Brazilian actors involved in the Pirara arbitration, whose actions were shaped by the profound political transformation brought about by the proclamation of the Republic in 1889. Both the Baron of Rio Branco and Joaquim Nabuco operated within increasingly new social, political, and economic



configurations, and were likewise subject to the redefined horizon of “patriotism” that accompanied the republican transition.

At this point, it is necessary to introduce a second *collective singular* identified by Koselleck: “progress.” Although commonly associated with improvement in relation to the past and advancement toward the future, the concept of progress also helps to clarify the limits under which historical actors operate. As Koselleck argues, appeals to progress may function to displace responsibility from concrete decisions onto an apparently impersonal historical process, insofar as action is justified in the name of an inevitable temporal movement (Koselleck, 2020, p. 183). In such cases, agency is partially absorbed by the logic of time itself, which appears as continuous, unavoidable, and forward-moving. The future, although nonexistent, is always the next and unavoidable step, and “progress” is the way towards it. Especially in moments of crisis, this temporal logic can intensify, narrowing the horizon of conceivable alternatives. “Progress,” in this sense, does not expand freedom of action but structures its limits, shaping how responsibility, necessity, and legitimacy are understood within *the political field*.

As noted above, the principal actors on Brazil’s side were the Baron of Rio Branco and Joaquim Nabuco, both formed politically within the imperial order. Rio Branco was a recognized expert in boundary negotiations, having participated in diplomatic efforts since the post-Paraguayan War settlements under the leadership of his father, the Viscount of Rio Branco. He later played decisive roles in Brazil’s victories in the Amapá and Palmas arbitrations and in the resolution of the Acre Question, despite facing criticism in the latter case (Villafañe, 2018). Nabuco, a prominent statesman of the Empire, served as head of Brazil’s legal defense in the Pirara arbitration, overseeing the production of eighteen volumes of memorials in support of Brazil’s claims. Both figures thus carried into the republican period political formations, expectations, and conceptual horizons shaped under the monarchy, even as they adapted to the institutional and symbolic reconfiguration inaugurated in 1889.

By 1904, many of the expectations associated with republican “progress” appeared to be materializing. Civilian control of the executive had been consolidated since 1894, and the routinization of the republican regime was largely achieved during the Campos Salles administration (Lessa, 2015, p. 184). Economic conditions also improved, driven by fiscal stabilization policies, the expansion of rubber exports, and renewed European investment in the Brazilian economy (Fritsch, 2014, p. 50).

Within this context, progress became a dominant frame through which political stability and national advancement were understood. Brazil increasingly perceived itself as aligned with the broader Latin American republican order, which - aside from Canada and the Caribbean - had formed a “unique collection of sovereign republics” since the 1820s (Hobsbawm, 2017, p. 96).



This sense of forward movement was reinforced by the urban reforms undertaken during the Rodrigues Alves administration (1902–1906), particularly in Rio de Janeiro. Under Pereira Passos, the capital of the Republic saw its streets enlarged, close to the style of Paris' streets, and the physical removal of the so-called Castle Hill [*Morro do Castelo*] in order to create flat areas in the city. While these interventions symbolized modernization, they also generated social tensions, most visibly expressed in the Vaccine Revolt of 1904 (Fausto, 2015, p. 256).

The republican context imposed a strong imperative of patriotic action on Rio Branco, Nabuco, and the other actors involved in the Pirara arbitration. Patriotism functioned not as a personal disposition, but as a political expectation shaped by the new institutional and symbolic order established after 1889. The social pressures operating in the early Republic gradually differed from those of the imperial period, requiring forms of action adapted to a transformed state framework.

In this sense, the defense offered by Olyntho de Magalhães regarding the choice of Victor Emmanuel III as referee is revealing. Writing on the occasion of the centenary of Campos Salles, he argued that "no one who values the honor of his country can suspect that its government would have entrusted a cause of such importance and responsibility to unreliable arbitrators, leaving it unprotected and at the mercy of subordinate whims" (Menck, 2009, p. 214). This statement illustrates how patriotic honor operated as a normative horizon that structured what could be publicly affirmed, defended, or questioned.

Olyntho's words reveal how the decision that disfavoured Brazil weighed on those involved, particularly on Joaquim Nabuco, the Brazilian lawyer in the case, whose career would later culminate in his post as ambassador to the United States, where he died in 1910 (Menck, 2009, p. 478). In a telegram to his wife dated June 17, 1904, Nabuco wrote that "in the future map of Brazil, the breach through which England penetrated the Amazon basin, after having prevented France from doing so, will bear my name; but I will also remember a great defense, the most dedicated and complete that the nation could hope for" (Menck, 2009, p. 48). This episode illustrates how *the political* extends beyond formal decisions and institutional arenas, inhabiting the lived experience and memory of historical actors.

Conclusion

This article does not seek to exhaust the analysis of *the political*, nor to fix Rosanvallon's proposal into a closed or definitive framework. Nor does it aim to clarify historical developments beyond the specific event analyzed here, or to account for all the other unrealized outcomes that might emerge from the analytical perspective advanced. Its aim has been more modest and more precise: to build on Rosanvallon's conceptual distinction between politics and *the political* in



order to demonstrate the analytical breadth opened by a *globalizing analysis of the political*. By foregrounding this alterity, the article shows that the study of *the political* gains density precisely when it moves beyond institutional politics and reconstructs the less visible conditions through which power, legitimacy, and meaning are produced.

Seen from this perspective, my reading from Rosanvallon's proposal is that it does not confine itself to political historiography narrowly understood. Rather, it advances a broad hermeneutic orientation in which contributions from other fields of knowledge are not ancillary, but constitutive. Philosophy, literary analysis, sociology, and conceptual history are not external supplements to historical inquiry; they provide indispensable analytical tools for apprehending dimensions of *the political* that remain inaccessible through event-centered or institutional approaches alone.

That said, the article's first part clarified the scope of *the political* and its distinction from politics, emphasizing that a *globalizing analysis* - understood not as geographical enlargement but as analytical reconstruction - is necessary to access the deeper layers of political life. In the second part, this framework was put to the test through the Pirara Question. There, the mobilization of philosophical reflection, literary analogy, and conceptual history illuminated both the ethical stakes of historical narration - particularly the responsibility to render visible the range of possibilities available to historical actors - and the structural limits that shaped political action in practice.

Taken together, these analyses suggest that a globalizing approach to *the political* does not merely expand the scope of historical inquiry; it transforms its epistemic ambition. By making explicit the conditions under which political decisions became intelligible and legitimate, such an approach enables a more rigorous, reflexive, and ethically attentive political history - one attentive not only to what happened, but to what could have happened, and to the constraints that made those possibilities unevenly available.

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Additional Information

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