El imperio eres tú

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El imperio eres tú is the seventh book written by Spanish novelist Javier Moro, with which he won the prestigious (though controversial) Planeta Prize for best novel in 2011. The book is a fictionalized biography of Emperor Pedro I of Brazil (1798-1834), founder and first ruler of the Empire of Brazil. Though long (548 pages, excluding acknowledgements and a bibliography at the end), the novel is very entertaining yet substantive, well-written, proceeds at a good pace, and is never dull. I highly recommend this novel for translation to English for the reasons outlined below.

The novel begins with a two-page vignette of the first contact between Europeans and native Americans in the territory of what was to become Brazil. This vignette is a kind of prologue depicting an originary moment of cultural encounter as Portuguese Admiral Pedro Alvares Cabral and his men accidentally land on unknown shores. It is in this way that some of the key elements developed in the narrative are announced: chance circumstances leading to portentous moments, the strangeness of European customs and values transplanted onto foreign shores, the harsh consequences of authoritarian rule, and human beings catapulted into historically transcendent moments despite very human frailties. For example, when Cabral, dressed in full uniform, prepares to meet with the Tupi Indians, he realizes uncomfortably that the trappings of his power—his gold collar, throne-like chair, luxurious rug at his feet, and authoritative demeanor—do not arouse the least amount of attention, let alone respect, among the Tupi. The moment augurs one of the central elements of the story that follows, namely, the degree to which Old World institutions and traditions of power can be applied to the realities of the New World.

The novel is divided into nine parts, with a prologue mentioned above and an epilogue. The story is set largely in Rio de Janeiro, where King João VI of Portugal has fled in exile with his family and the entire royal court after French troops commanded by Napoleon invade his kingdom. Part 1 introduces the future Emperor Pedro, the second son and heir of João VI, in 1816 as a young man. The product of a hostile marriage between a weak-willed, suspicious but benevolent father and a mean-spirited, ambitious and distant mother, Pedro was neglected by his parents and raised with little structure or restraint. At age 18 when the novel begins, Pedro, far removed from political affairs by his father, is depicted as an outdoorsman and a prankster with a wild streak, a young man with a spotty formal education more adept at physical activity such as horseback riding and carpentry than intellectual pursuits. At a young age he is irreverent, uncouth, and already known for his considerable sexual appetite, a characteristic that will follow him throughout his life. He takes up with a local French ballerina, Noemí, even as his marriage to María Leopoldina Archduchess of Austria, is plotted. Part 2 is devoted to Leopoldina who progressively emerges as one of the more sympathetic characters in the novel. We see her initially as a young woman in Austria, with a strong moral and intellectual bent, and dreams of living in the American continent in the exotic natural setting she had read about in her beloved science books. As was customary at the time for the nobility, this was an arranged marriage, the product of political alliances and not necessarily of love. With the transition towards a constitutional monarchy in Portugal, King John returns and leaves his son to assume his place as Regent in Brazil. Subsequent chapters lead the reader through the complex political processes of Pedro’s role in Brazilian independence, the consolidation of his power as a Liberal emperor and his struggle to reconcile his authoritarian leanings with the progressive ideology he espouses. The novel also delves into the effects of Brazil’s independence on Portugal as well as the outright hostile personal and political relationship between João and Carlota. It traces Pedro’s political and personal decline as nationalists increasingly demand the elimination of any trace of Portuguese presence within the structures of power in the former colony. This forces the Portuguese-born Pedro to abdicate in 1831 in favor of his son, Pedro II, and to leave Brazil forever. We last see former Emperor Pedro, now Duke of Braganza, engaged in international diplomacy and, finally, in battle to ultimately wrest Portugal from the hands of his treacherous half-brother Miguel, to install his daughter Maria da Glória as Empress and himself as Regent. He finally succumbs to tuberculosis and dies in 1834 at age 35.

As political leader, Pedro is depicted in all of his contradictions: in turn as a Liberal idealist, a schemer, a victim of treason, a despot. Indeed, the title of the novel, which in English would be The Empire Is You, suggests a play on the famous words of Louis XIV, that most absolutist of kings: “L’état c’est moi or I am the State.” Pedro, by contrast, reigned within the much more circumscribed context of a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. A large part of the tension in the novel derives from this conflict between the Liberal philosophies he espoused and his absolutist tendencies.
Closely intertwined with this story of political upheaval and intrigue are the personal trajectories of Pedro and his closest family members, particularly his father João, his mother Carlota, his wives Leopoldina and Amelia, and mistresses Noemí and Domitila. We witness the young married Pedro’s adulterous relationship with Domitila, a mestiza commoner, whom he progressively and brazenly installs publicly as a Lady-in-Waiting to his first wife Leopoldina. We follow Leopoldina and her sense of moral duty to remain by her philandering husband’s side in an inhospitable climate surrounded by palace intrigue. She ultimately dies of a broken heart. The novel also depicts Pedro as a loving and caring father, even with the six illegitimate children born to him by Domitila.

As can be gleaned from the summary sketched out above, the novel is packed with a multitude of characters and events, spanning some 30 years. I found a nice balance between the narration of political affairs and that of personal lives. Both are given equal time, and while the story dwells on a few specific scenes, the amount of detail is never overwhelming and the action and scenes proceed at a good clip. The author never loses the reader with useless detail, but rather gives just enough to appreciate the social or political backdrop behind the personal stories. It is well-researched and documented, as indicated by the bibliography listed at the end, which includes key works of Brazilian history and culture. It is a straight-up historical/biographical novel, and in this regard the treatment of the subject matter—the life of Emperor Pedro I of Brazil— is not particularly original or unique. The style and language are clear, not at all convoluted, and do not get in the way of the plot. The literary technique and treatment of time are also very straightforward: the plot basically proceeds in chronological order with several flashbacks intertwined. The realistic treatment of the narrative only serves to enhance the truly extraordinary nature of the story itself, which is rightly left to stand on its own. There are no literary fireworks needed. This is a story of the founding of the modern nation of Brazil, an epic saga stranger than fiction. For the first time in history, a colony becomes the seat of a colonial empire, and a monarch ultimately secures independence guided by Liberal philosophies of the time. Moreover, the cast of real-life characters could easily have been fictional inventions themselves: João IV, an exiled monarch who rarely bathed, except when submerged in a sieve-like bathtub suspended in the ocean, suspicious of his own heir to the point of excluding him from political life; his adulterous wife Carlota, who neglected most of her own children, was accused twice of murder, and ultimately plotted against and usurped the throne from her own husband. And then there is Pedro himself, who grew up without parental supervision and few restraints, physical or otherwise, and enjoyed traveling in public with his wife and mistress in tow.

This novel would carry over well in English with an educated, general U.S. readership. Mr. Moro is a Spaniard writing about Brazil; he is a foreigner writing in Spanish about a Portuguese-speaking country. As such, he is better able to translate the reality he is narrating for a broader audience than a native. He does not take for granted that the reader is familiar with the period, the country or the language. For example, he is careful to explain that carioca is the term to denote a person from Rio de Janeiro. There are many instances of this kind of cultural translation that unobtrusively provide cultural and historical context for a general reader. The novel deals with a fascinating historical period, one of momentous change in the Americas as well as in Europe as the old regime crumbles and new political movements take root. Brazil’s transformation into a modern nation, its independence from Europe, was unique within the Americas. From a comparative perspective with the United States, I would think this very different story of how democratic institutions developed would be very compelling. It would be of great interest to a general, non-Latin U.S. audience and also to a growing English-speaking Latino population, whether of Brazilian descent or not. Finally, Brazil is fast emerging as a leading economy in the world, a fact that has surely sparked increased interest in its history and culture.

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