

Molesky, Mark. *This Gulf of Fire: the Destruction of Lisbon, or Apocalypse in the Age of Science and Reason*. New York: Knopf, 2015, 500pp. ISBN: 978-0-307-26762-7

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Lisbon awoke on Saturday, November 1 1755, the All Saints Day holiday, to a clear day and a blue sky. Shortly after nine in the morning, when the ground began to shake, thereby announcing one of the greatest catastrophes of the Modern Age, a large part of its residents were on their way to—or had already been in—the churches, all across the city, to commemorate the day. Trapped in churches or in narrow streets, thousands died, crushed under the mass of rubble to which the once effulgent city was reduced in a matter of minutes. Various tremors followed, causing a tidal wave; the Tagus River rose up from its bed and a gigantic wave hit the lower city. Finally, a terrible fire destroyed many of the buildings that had somehow managed to remain upright. The image of the city was terrifying, and, according to one chronicler, what he saw was “the work of a thousand years [being] destroyed in two minutes.” “Lisbon had been razed, burnt, and turned to ash: Lisbon had fallen on Lisbon.”² This is the scenario that Mark Molesky examines in *Gulf of Fire*.

The character who introduces the reader to this cataclysm is the Jesuit priest Gabriel Malagrida, who, first from improvised pulpits in the city and afterwards in his book entitled *Juízo da Verdadeira Causa do Terramoto*, boasted to the Portuguese of his apocalyptic vision of the earthquake and urged them to repent their sins. *Gulf of Fire* reveals a paradoxical figure—he was, at the same time, both the maximum exponent of the religious interpretation of the earthquake and the final fatal victim of the Lisbon Inquisition. Even though the basis for his condemnation was religious in nature, since the designs of God are unfathomable and it is not for men to boast of interpreting them, it cannot be denied that, officially, one of the central bodies for the implementation of cultural policy operating under the aegis of Marquis de Pombal publicly stated that it was in favor of the explanation

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² Apud: Charles Brooks. *Disaster at Lisbon, the Great Earthquake of 1755*. Long Beach: Longley Press, 1994, p. 24.

of natural causes as being responsible for the event.³ In this way, it expressed the anxieties of the Portuguese intellectual elite, amongst whom the predominant belief was that natural causes were the explanation for the earthquake.

However, *Gulf of Fire* does not limit itself to examining Malagrida's view of events. Numerous characters—many of them foreigners—serve as guides for Molesky to describe and examine how the residents of Lisbon experienced what they perceived to be the three horsemen of the apocalypse—the earth in fury, water, and fire—crashing into the city. The chronology is extensive: it starts at the (apparently interminable) moment of the event itself and continues for days, months, and then years as Lisbon finds itself still experiencing its fatal consequences. It was a traumatic experience for the survivors. The wealth and glory accumulated over so many centuries, and which made the city the mirror of this power, especially after the discovery of gold and diamonds in Brazil, was swept away in just a few minutes. While the residents of Lisbon had felt terror, the reactions that the earthquake aroused in the European and American public were ones of amazement and disbelief. Molesky reveals how newspapers were efficient vehicles for communicating the tragedy and how they molded a certain version of it, sometimes distorting, and frequently exaggerating, its devastating effects. However, they also encouraged gestures of solidarity, which came from all sides, and produced a profusion of written discourses of a literary, poetic, and scientific nature.

The book also focuses on the reactions of the authorities to the catastrophe which hit the city, most notably the role played by the king, José I, and by the Marquis of Pombal. The latter's attentions were directed towards pragmatic questions, immortalized in the famous phrase attributed to him that it was necessary, before anything else, to bury the dead and look after the living, and not to pray for the souls of those who had been taken. He demonstrated his ability to exploit "the talents and resources of the most powerful and capable people in the kingdom" (189) in order to restore order.

While, to a large extent, life in the city was heavily marked by business, it was the time dedicated to God that shaped the essence of daily life. The many churches and the constant ringing of their bells, the religious processions and festivities, the convents scattered all across the city, the constant proximity between the profane and the sacred, all served to remind everyone that the world was ruled and governed by God but that life was lived according to their own dictates. Thus, in reaction to the gigantic catastrophe that had

³ In relation to Joaquim de Santana's censorship of Malagrida's pamphlet, see: Rui Tavares. "Lembrar, esquecer, censurar." *Estudos Avançados*, São Paulo, vol. 13, no. 37, 1999.

befallen Lisbon, it was natural that such manifestations of religious devotion and mysticism should intensify among the city's residents. Being accustomed to this proximity between the terrestrial and the celestial spheres, at that moment of extreme affliction the stunned residents of Lisbon sought protection from what seemed to them to be an inexplicable misfortune in the Lord, the Virgin Mary, Jesus, the angels, and the numerous saints of the celestial court. It was therefore understandable, amid the rubble of buildings and churches that hindered the return to normal daily routines, the small aftershocks, and the terrible winter that followed, that expressions of true faith should spontaneously arise among the citizens who remained scattered in the fields, living in canvas tents, afraid that their roofs might once again fall on their heads. It was their way of mitigating the incalculable pain and losses that they had suffered in terms of both life and property.⁴ However, Molesky does not fall into the trap of crediting this recourse to religion to the Portuguese alone, as is the case with a significant part of the historiography.⁵ He argues that it was not only the Portuguese who initially ascribed religious causes to the earthquake, pointing out that this was widely believed and commonly used as an explanation at that time (including among Protestants), and that the same belief was also frequently voiced in various parts of Europe. As Charles B. Brooks notes, while the principle of religious fervor seriously interfered with the city's recovery from the catastrophe, it nonetheless helped to forge an important connection between people, making them sensitive to the orders of the clergy, who played such an important role in the reorganization of the disordered reality that followed the tremor.⁶

The text reveals that this reinforcement of Catholic religiosity was associated with the process of the naturalization and rationalization of knowledge, in which studies designed to understand the seismological phenomenon in Lisbon played a significant role. Reading Molesky's arguments, we can understand that the impact of the earthquake on Western thought enabled people to focus their attention on the new configurations in the relationship between religion and science. As Molesky himself points out, the religious fervor unleashed by the tremor was associated with, and not excluded from, the division between religion and nature that was already being made in the context of the Enlightenment, in Portugal just as much as in other European countries, a movement to

⁴ Júnia F. Furtado "A santa, o terramoto e os diamantes." In: Ana Cristina Araújo; José Luis Cardoso, Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro, Walter Rossa, José Vicente Serrão. (eds.) *O terramoto de 1755: impactos históricos*. Lisboa: Livros Horizontes, 2007, pp. 345-353.

⁵ I draw attention, in particular, to Mary del Priori. *O Mal sobre a Terra: uma História do Terramoto de Lisboa*. Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 2003.

⁶ Charles Brooks. *Disaster at Lisbon, the Great Earthquake of 1755*, p. 97.

which studies about the earthquake made a significant contribution. The earthquake represented a crucial moment in the search for rational causes and explanations for natural events, to which men of science, particularly Portuguese intellectuals, contributed decisively. In this sense, with its power of destruction and renewal, it encapsulated the new times that were approaching, more so than any other event could ever do.