

Erik Lars Myrup, *Power and Corruption in the Early Modern Portuguese World*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. ISBN - 978-0-8071-5980-4

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Understanding and explaining the formation of the Portuguese colonial possessions, their functioning, their dynamics and the forces that would turn them into a cohesive whole in modern times, has been a major challenge for generations of historians of different nationalities. Among these numerous studies, those which focus their attention on what we might call a renewed political and institutional history have recently gained greater consistency and consolidation.

One might describe history as having been “renewed” in the political field, because these historians are no longer obsessed with state power. Political power, its practice and its scope, is not confined to state boundaries. In fact, if we follow the path opened up by Michel Foucault, political power is coextensive with social power. Seen from this perspective, the concept of the state has been subjected to rigorous questioning. Indeed, after the studies undertaken by António Manuel Hespanha, the specificity of the state in the modern period, or rather under the Old Regime (*Ancien Régime*), is now very clear, contrasting starkly with the state resulting from the transformations that took place in the Age of Revolutions (Eric Hobsbawm) and from those that were introduced, in particular, by liberalism.

Furthermore, history has also been renewed in the institutional field, because it is no longer a question of formally investigating an institution based on its legal statutes and other regulations, leaving the social actors in the background. The central problem of the history of institutions has become a matter of recovering the network of individuals and the social and power relations that constitute an institution or a group of institutions, permeating them and causing them to interact (Jean Pierre Dedieu).

By linking these cornerstones and the approach that emerges from them with the impact of the foundational and fertile studies by Charles Boxer, Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, AJR Russell-Wood, Dauril Alden and Stuart Schwartz on different facets of the

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Portuguese overseas empire, we will succeed in assembling the frame of references that is necessary for understanding this important book by Erik Lars Myrup.

Nine years after defending his doctoral thesis (*To Rule From Afar: The Overseas Council and the Making of the Brazilian West, 1642-1807*, Yale University, 2006), Myrup gives us this *Power and Corruption*, a thought-provoking, up-to-date and especially relevant title. In his own words: “In this book, I argue that the Portuguese empire was brought together by an evolving web of human relationships that lay beneath the surface of formal colonial government. More specifically, I show how the powers of the colonial state were both magnified and diminished by informal networks of patronage and power that not only facilitated corruption and exchange, but also ensured the survival of empire in times of crisis and decline” (3).

This is the crucial point of the analysis, namely the relationship between the formal and the informal aspects of the reality investigated. In other words, the author strives to produce and operate a dynamic view, linking together two complex webs, namely the State and its network of interconnected institutions, and a web of personal connections. Likewise, the emphasis, i.e., the most substantial and effective explanatory power, is placed on those interpersonal relationships that were subject to state influence, through laws and regulations, discourses and practices. Bringing this set of informal (and sometimes illegal) relationships to the fore and highlighting their importance is, in my view, the most important contribution that this book makes to our understanding of the Portuguese overseas empire.

Power and Corruption therefore remains undazzled by the brilliance of the state and its legitimizing discourses. Indeed, it even dares to make irony of them. At one point in the text, and in the midst of the necessary explanation of the application by the Portuguese monarchy of the concepts of justice, graces and favors, and the system of *mercês* (a system of royal compensation for the rendering of services), all directly inspired by the teaching and spread of religious beliefs, the author, with the aim of remembering how rich reality is and how far removed it is from its suggested idealizations, ending up by stating: “In practice, of course, kings were not gods, and in this sense were not limited by the laws that governed deity” (99). To put it simply, the social and personal practices of the political power, even not disregarding the established limits, is nonetheless able to surpass them.

This sophisticated observation of Myrup’s is essential for anyone seeking to relate the formal and the informal, the licit and the illicit, the center and the periphery, the metropolis and the colony, order and disorder. To relate does not mean to take one side

and to ignore the other. To relate means to travel along the different axes and bends in a changing reality that moves toward or deviates from these reference points. Extremes are artifices. The story takes place in the meanders.

He who says meanders could also say garrets, deviations and disorders. Thus, the benefits received from the exercise of colonial positions not only rewarded zealous service, loyalty to the king and the total “disinterest and clean hands” (*desinteresse e limpeza de mãos*) of a governor, a comptroller or any other official. According to Myrup, “corruption, bribery, and smuggling all flourished during this period, and, significantly, the very officials who were supposed to prevent such crimes were often among the chief instigators” (4). And, most importantly, this cannot be overlooked; otherwise, we shall be ignoring a significant part of the social reality.

It should be emphasized that the decision to investigate what is not formally instituted presents major problems and challenges for every historian, since it calls into question moral issues both past and present that may, for instance, hinder the true understanding of the role played by corruption and smuggling, resulting in the researcher adopting two modes of conduct. The first of these is to adopt an attitude of outright censure, summarily expelling such considerations from the list of relevant social practices that deserve study; the second is to regard such practices as natural and normal, eliminating corruption and smuggling from the reality studied by denying their very existence as illegal practices, claiming that these are everyday activities inherent in all times and, consequently operating its subsumption to other lawful practices. Myrup does not fall into either of these traps, which is no mean feat.

The book is divided into three parts (Europe, South America and Asia), each consisting of two chapters. In the first chapter (Captivity, Redemption, and the Birth of the Royal Council), through the narration of the life of the first president of the Overseas Council, Jorge Mascarenhas, and the analysis of the context of his time, the book examines the different roles played by social networks in the constitution and functioning of the court in Lisbon. In parallel, it also presents to the reader the informal level of the social reality of that time, made up of informal networks of patronage and power operating below the formal level, and interacting intensely with it. In the second chapter (Kings, Colonies, and Councilors), the personal connections of Overseas Councilors are examined from the point of view of their collective histories in order to examine the global nature of the Portuguese social networks. Because of its composition and its mode of operation, the Overseas Council facilitated and supported the creation of a complex web of social

networks that radiated from Lisbon and reached into the most remote areas of the Portuguese possessions.

In the second part, South America, the third chapter (Centers and Peripheries in the Luso-Brazilian World) shows how the patron-client networks connected distant and unexplored parts of Brazil to the colonial administrative structure based in the metropolis of Portugal proper. Through the study of the achievements and the times of Antonio Raposo Tavares, the author provides a decentralized view of the personal connections that supported the formal administrative network from its very base. In this sense, it shows how the explorers of the hinterland and other settlers on the edges of the empire took advantage of this official network and, at the same time, strengthened the power and the reach of the Portuguese State. In fact, the author maintains that personal connections were, after all, far more important in the making of colonial Brazil than were any formal institutional links. In turn, the fourth chapter (Gambling Governors and Gilded Lead) centers its analysis on the role of the governor of São Paulo, Rodrigo César de Meneses (1721-1728), and the challenges that were faced in the establishment of royal authority in the most distant and conflict-ridden parts of Brazil, namely the mines that were discovered at that time in Cuiabá. In such faraway places, where the royal power was necessarily very weak, and in the midst of a gold rush, social networks and personal connections played multiple roles in determining the relationship between the Colony and the Crown. Thus, in many ways, the story of Governor Rodrigo César provides a counterpoint to the central authority of the Overseas Council, contributing to an understanding of the negotiated nature of the State. Although the Council was a powerful metropolitan institution, its powers were curtailed both by other institutions of the State itself and by colonizing agents such as governors, judges, military personnel, and municipal councilors, among others.

In the third part, Asia, the fifth chapter (One King, Two Crowns) examines Portuguese-Spanish relations in East Asia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Specifically, the chapter explores the formal and informal connections that linked the Portuguese in Macau to the Spanish in Manila, showing how the Iberian world was connected by social networks that united and divided the two most powerful European empires. As in other chapters, the main argument explores the idea that the Portuguese-Spanish interaction in those parts of Asia preferentially operated beneath the formal structures of government, sometimes bringing these two empires together, sometimes decidedly pushing them away from each other. Furthermore, the networks were able to guarantee that Macau had a strong Portuguese identity, despite the geographic distance and

the colony's numerous commercial and political connections with the Spanish empire. The sixth and final chapter (The Case of the Missing Men) particularly attracts the reader with an account of a criminal investigation into the disappearance and murder of two Chinese by Portuguese barbarians in Macau. In this part of the planet, reports say that the Portuguese *were* the cannibals, not the local population, as opposed to what was happening in South America. This leads to a complete about-turn in terms of perspective, causing the personal connections and social networks that operated beneath the surface of the formal relations between the Portuguese and the Chinese to be seen from the outside and showing how colonial administrators, traders and missionaries were perceived by the bureaucracy of the Chinese Empire. The memorial left by the Chinese viceroy, largely based on the information provided by the researcher Zhang Rulin, and the one that was left by the viceroy Pedro Miguel de Almeida e Portugal are cleverly explored and compared with other documents. The outcome of this comparison not only surprises us, but also reveals the tremendous interweaving of interpersonal relationships among such different worlds, without neglecting the role of fraud, smuggling and corruption in the history of the Portuguese colonial world.

In the concluding words of the author, revealing his ability to think about the past in the light of the present, an attribute that makes this book particularly attractive for the contemporary reader: “The personal networks that spanned Portugal’s colonial empire—begetting such things as patronage and paternalism, cross-cultural communication, commercial networks, corruption, and fraud—continue to play themselves out today, not only in Portugal and Brazil, but also in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Goa, Macau, and a myriad of other places around the globe” (178).

Finally, yet importantly, and without showing any special favor, we wish to place it on record that the printed knowledge contained in this book is outstanding in its accuracy, the breadth and depth of its research, its precise explanations, its hands-on evidence, and above all its clarity of exposition, leaving it, fortunately, within the grasp of every reader that is genuinely interested in history.