

**Arndt Brendecke**

*Imperio e información. Funciones del saber en el dominio colonial español*  
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In the Spanish Monarchy judges were called *oidores* and fiscal inspectors *vededores*. Such emphasis on eyes and ears as the ruling organs of the body polity reveals much about the nature of the early modern European and colonial state. Dominion and legitimacy were intimately connected to the reporting of what was heard and seen. It should therefore surprise no one that tens of thousands of written reports moved back and forth across the oceans, painstakingly describing every event, object, and transaction. Historians have been too quick to call this massive output of description and reporting “empiricism”. In the rush to counter the self-satisfying Northern European narratives of the origins modernity and the Scientific Revolution, historians of early modern Spain (myself included) have contributed mightily to developing a counter-narrative, namely, that empiricism and modernity first began in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese and Spanish maritime and colonial global expansions. It turns out that this new narrative is as misleading as the one it sought to replace.

Brendecke's *Imperio e Infomacion* (originally published in 2009 in German as *Imperium und Empire. Funktionen des Wissens in der spanischen Kolonialherrschaft*) is a remarkable book. It shatters many a preconception about the alleged relationship between empiricism, objectivity, and early modern imperial expansions. More importantly, it opens significant new perspectives on the links between knowledge and power. It forcefully counters many of Foucault's assumptions, now considered canonical.

Brendecke identifies pre-modern ways of governing that were not based on the collection of evidence to streamline rulership. Brendecke is interested in state formation in places without “modern” rationalizing bureaucracies and with very thin ones to boot. He ultimately seeks to explain a miracle: the sixteenth-century emergence of a lasting, stable colonial state in places like Mexico and Peru, so distant in more ways than one from Madrid. What was the glue that kept the pre-modern and colonial states together? For Brendecke the key lies in the ways information flowed. Pre-modern information flows did not seek to collect, establish, and deploy knowledge to rule. The monarch was expected to be “informed” so as to be able to distribute rewards and to mete out justice. Justice consisted in carefully listening and seeing and in gathering demands from vassals directly or through intermediaries. Vassals volunteered information constantly, promiscuously so as to receive rewards.

It was also within the purview of the monarch to prompt subjects to inform, actually, to denounce each other. Brendecke sees the “inquisition” as a crucial new technology introduced for the benefit and stability of the pre-modern medieval state: the act of anonymously denouncing superiors by commoners allowed the monarchy (and the church) to bring large numbers of peoples into the co-creation of legitimacy and dominium.

According to Brendecke the pre-modern state needed co-vigilance to work: the monarch was at the apex of a communicative triangle that pitted individuals against one another, each demanding the monarch to pass judgment or settle disputes. Legitimacy and dominium emerged out of the need of the accuser and the accused to resolve conflict through kingly arbitration. There was a state the moment in which two individuals decided that a distant ruler had the legitimacy to arbitrate. Legitimacy and dominium stemmed out of this complex feedback loop: accusation, information, mediation, procrastination, and resolution. Bureaucracies were no more than the mediators and conduits of accusations and requests for rewards. As such these mediators acted as gatekeepers of information, limiting access to councilors and the monarch while themselves developing universes of patronage, rewards, and communicative triangles of their own. “Bureaucrats”, in turn, were also under careful scrutiny through the institutionalization of inquisitorial processes that pitted individual functionaries and jurisdictions against one another. The monarch stood at the apex of the triangle for final arbitration.

Brendecke argues that the colonial state worked the same way as the pre-modern monarchical state, but the circulation of information in an out of the former was that much slower. Participants in the flows of communication and arbitration, however, used distance and time to their advantage. Local, colonial supplicants and accusers knew that their power resided in their ability to keep the monarch only partially informed. The monarch, in turn, acknowledged the limits to his sovereignty and dominium by acquiescing to local demands and customary law. To rule, the colonial state was to arbitrate according to contingency and circumstance. Brendecke establishes that there was no “colonial law” but the institutionalization of jurisprudence as casuistry. By the 1630s, for example, those seeking to extract a corpus of laws for the Indies had to scour through some thick 500 folio volumes of specific royal *cédulas* and fiats.

The “state” grappled with distance in ambivalent and contradictory ways. One the one hand, it sought to eliminate the dependency on the expertise of local informants. On the other, it also sought to avoid perception that the king served only to rubber-stamp decisions already taken in local colonial settings. Were the monarch just to rubber-stamp, he would have eliminated his very *raison d'être* and thus the very springs of his dominium and legitimacy.

The monarch therefore made it a rule to avoid integrating local judges and magistrates (*oidores*) as councilors into the most important system of bureaucratic control available to the state, namely, the Council of Indies. This radical exclusion of locals from gatekeeping systems of metropolitan control did not mean that locals did not have access to the monarchy: in fact colonials came to dominate the everyday working of the Council of Indies as secretaries, establishing family dynasties that passed down the post through generations.

It should be clear that Brendecke sheds abundant light on the workings of the pre-modern and colonial states. But he does more than that. He also explores the way information traveled from colonial local settings to the court and back. His is a book on the rhetoric of objectivity and science. To work, the state drew on the inquisitorial system of depositions of witnesses. All participants communicating demands or requesting rewards sought to avoid the impression of being self-interested. The rhetoric of eye-witnessing and objective detachment emerged out of the very workings of the state and it hid the strong partisan motivations of all involved.

Brendecke, for example, explores the case that pitted pilots and cosmographers in the Casa de Contratación in Seville throughout the sixteenth century. Ursula Lamb and Alison Sandman have studied the different agendas behind this debate and have cast it as a struggle between artisan-practitioners, the pilots, against those bent on mathematizing space for geopolitical reasons (the result of the fight with Portugal over determining longitude lines on the ocean to claim less or more territories in Brazil and the Pacific islands), the cosmographers. For Lamb and Sandman the debate is one between the new modern sciences and a pre-modern praxis. For Brendecke the debate is rather one between two praxes, both claiming to represent the truth. Brendecke shows that over time and according to circumstances the sharp artisanal rhetoric of the pilots blended with the scientific one of the cosmographers and vice versa. Ultimately what mattered was not the truth of how to represent and navigate through space but how best to gain rewards and access to networks of patronage.

Brendecke caps his masterful book with a series of chapters on the reform of the 1570s of the *Consejo de Indias*. In the 1560s the Indies seemed to be spiraling out of control: *encomenderos*, *caciques*, the church, and *oidores* were all pulling the state in different directions. Moreover, the pope was about to reclaim control over the church after having delegated his spiritual sovereignty over souls to the Spanish king. The response to the mounting crisis was a *junta* led by a new cardinal, Diego de Espinosa, which enacted a number of sweeping reforms in both the colonies and the *Consejo* itself. The cardinal's creatures gained control over the *Consejo* and launched an investigation (a *visita*) of past

practices. Brendecke explores the investigations led by Juan de Ovando, the new *Consejo* president. Brendecke also explores the solutions offered by Ovando that included the participation of local colonial magistrates as councilors. This new radical departure did not find support with the monarch who feared losing dominium over the distant Indies to powerful local colonial-brokers-now-turned-courtiers. To make up for the ban, Ovando launched a sweeping campaign to assemble information from every town, villa, and city in the Indies. The purpose of this collecting effort, the so-called *Relaciones geográficas*, was not to inaugurate a new science of cosmography based on empiricism as some historians like Maria Portuondo and Antonio Barrera have suggested. The purpose rather was to incorporate vast new constituencies into the royal triangles of communications. Ovando sought to expand the base of those who, by accepting the mediating role of the monarch, were summoned not only to acknowledge the monarch's sovereignty and dominium but also to co-create the state from the ground up.

The difficult Germanic prose of Brendecke's conceptual history has been deftly and clearly translated into Spanish by Grisela Mársico, in a splendid edition by Iberoamerica-Vervuert. And yet this remains a challenging, long book to plow through. It would however be a pity if readers were to be kept from engaging with its dazzling, provocative new insights. This stout volume deserves an English translation.

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