

Arndt Brendecke (2012)

Imperio e información. Funciones del saber en el dominio colonial español

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During the past two decades, a substantial number of studies have addressed the development of knowledge-gathering practices in the colonial context. For scholars interested in the role of knowledge in the shaping of asymmetries between Europe's imperial powers and their non-European possessions, Spain's global empire has represented a particularly fruitful field of research. Spain administered its territorial empire through an expanding bureaucratic apparatus that was responsible for the increasingly systematic description of the Crown's possessions in the Americas and Asia. While some scholars have understood these efforts to map and describe colonial spaces and subjects as proof of the "epistemological violence" inherent to the imperial enterprise (22), other studies have advocated a more nuanced understanding of the knowledge asymmetry underpinning the power relationships between the center and peripheries. It is to the latter group that Arndt Brendecke, an experienced student of early modern power and information structures, belongs. In the translation of his most recent study (2009), Brendecke bridges the gap between European and Latin American

history to arrive at new interpretations of the function of knowledge in the constitution of authority and power.

In his *Imperio e información*, the author situates his analysis of knowledge regimes in the context of political communication and social practices. By analyzing a wide array of primary sources ranging from the late Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, he argues that the ideal of the king having full knowledge (*entera noticia*) of his overseas territories was of fundamental importance for the development of Spain's knowledge culture. He further maintains that the centralization of empirical information stemming from and regarding the periphery did not result in a "linear-progressive" increase in the concentration of power at that same center (26). Instead, the effects of the production and circulation of knowledge on the perception of political power were much more subtle and diverse.

In nine well-written chapters, Brendecke explores the various functions of knowledge within the administrative and communicative praxis of the realm. Chapters 1 and 2 explore

the importance of the legal formula of *entera noticia* in contemporary political language and representations. Chapter 3 commences with a brief exploration of the “epistemic setting” of the court. This chapter introduces some of the royal institutions, spaces, communication media and knowledge projects that played a role in what people in the center knew about the other parts of the realm. Chapter 4 continues to examine in more detail the Crown’s cartographical interest and focuses on the organization of nautical knowledge at Seville’s House of Trade. In chapter 5, attention shifts to the bureaucratic apparatus comprising the House of Trade, the Council of the Indies and the juridical and administrative institutions established in the American territories, which controlled practices of information and dominion. Chapter 6 explores the two main functions of knowledge – communication and control –, from within this institutional structure, as well as the culture of vigilance it created. In chapter 7, the objectives of Juan de Ovando’s famous program for the permanent description of American territories are described, while chapter 8 analyzes in more detail how viceregal subjects appropriated knowledge-gathering practices like the *Relaciones geográficas* to promote their own interests. Finally, chapter 9 deals with new ideas about the relationship between knowledge and politics developing at the court.

The book concludes that the objective of the center’s efforts to gather ever more empirical information about the periphery never was to “maximize” the Crown’s political rationality (336). Instead, initiatives to improve the

gathering, processing and organization of information helped to reinforce bonds of loyalty between the king and his overseas subjects. The idea that the monarch had a bureaucratic apparatus at his disposal that ensured he was being well-informed contributed to the legitimation of the royal authority in the overseas territories. This seems to suggest that more information did indeed lead to more power; However, seen from the perspective of the king or the state this power was relative. As a result of the king’s actual inability to see except through the eyes of others, “corridors of power” emerged that gave subjects and royal officials the opportunity to turn “interests” into “information”, and thus shape knowledge in such a way that the desired decision would automatically follow from what they described (337). On the other hand, the gathering of empirical data was still required to exercise absolute royal authority. It allowed the Crown to bind political operations and actors to itself and the “normative requirements” it defined, and to limit the decision-making power of local institutions (342-343).

Brendecke’s focus on the notion of *entera noticia* is essential to the political rationale he describes. It allows him to refute other scholars’ assumptions about the asymmetrical relationship between the knowledge-gathering center and a periphery in which empirical knowledge was gathered. Nevertheless, the question arises if the author’s choice for the commonly accepted ideal of the all-knowing king allows him to take into consideration the various “political” dimensions of the use of knowledge (22). What remains unquestioned, for example, are the

much more problematic discussions about the use and value of certain forms of knowledge in actual decision-making processes related to the administration of distributive justice. Persons promoting distinct notions of social inequality established different hierarchies between knowledge forms, which were used to determine the appropriate position of an individual or collective in the hierarchical social order. Such debates about the significance of astronomical, geographical, biological, physiological, psychological, historical and legal knowledge in producing and legitimizing human inequality are key to understanding the gradual evolution of the “fundamental” forms of knowledge – “questionnaires,” “fiscal data” and “political curiosity” (16-17) – referenced by Brendecke. A more detailed analysis of the hierarchization of distinct fields of knowledge could have further reinforced the “bottom-up” perspective to explain more persuasively the tactical politics that contemporaries used to turn interests into information.

Despite such observations, Brendecke deserves praise for crafting a very readable and thought-provoking study that encourages its readers to reflect on their implicit and explicit assumptions about the knowledge-power axiom. The work is based on a careful study of primary sources gathered in archives and libraries in Spain, Mexico, England and France, but also presents thorough considerations on a wide range of secondary sources. Due to his broad temporal, geographical and thematic scope the author is able to outline an asymmetrically-organized information network. This network had its own knowledge culture and practices

and it was indispensable for holding together Spain’s global empire. Our own experience illustrates the ability the Spanish translation of this valuable study has in bridging the gap between distinct disciplines, as well as between German and Latin American scholarly traditions. Graduate students and scholars interested in the relationship between knowledge and power, the formation of the early modern state and imperial history should all take note of this book.