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Review of Jean Dangler, *Edging Towards Iberia*

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Dangler, Jean. *Edging Towards Iberia*. Toronto Iberic. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. vii. + 170 pp.

For many years now, most historians in general (and those of the Iberian realms specifically) have known that geographical and/or chronological constructs such as “Spain,” the “Middle Ages,” “1492,” and similar generalizations are not to be trusted at all. Their deployment often reflects erroneous ideological and cultural projections of the present into the past. The same applies to such hackneyed concepts as the emphasis on a Muslim/Christian dichotomy in Iberia and elsewhere, or the even more tired and nefarious idea of the “clash of civilizations.” From its opening pages till its conclusion, Jean Dangler’s *Edging Towards Iberia* inveighs against such categories and constructs. While many of us do not need such reminders or, at least, do not need them all the time, it is always salutary to frequently hear these admonitions and to remember how very easy it is to fall prey to, or to fall into, these generalizations that tell us nothing useful about the past.

Within this framework, Dangler in her short and well-argued book emphasizes four specific aims. First, to provide a critique of the manner in which some scholars often embrace descriptions of the past that rely on modern notions of geography and chronology. These are the same issues described in the first paragraph of this review, as well as the reifying of ideas about religious and ethnic identities that have nothing to do with the reality of the past. This she does with a great deal of vigor and by invoking an exhaustive list of secondary sources and theoretical literature in support of her arguments.

Second, there is a methodological thread that runs throughout her work. Dangler often reminds us (in Part One and elsewhere in her book) of the importance of seeing the past, in this case, the evolving history of Iberian realms, people, and culture(s), within well-defined theoretical structures. Above all, Dangler argues for “network theory”—mostly a revised version of Castells’ arguments and, to a lesser extent, for Immanuel Wallerstein’s “World Systems Analysis” (a methodological approach towards world history that, borrowing from Braudel’s works on capitalism and material life and from neo-Marxist social history, enjoyed prominence in the 1970s and early 1980s, though far less at the forefront of historical analysis today). The author revisits these methodological tools, emphasizing their importance as the appropriate framework to examine anew the making of Iberia. Although she places far more emphasis on network analysis and spends considerable amount of time detailing the theoretical and historiographical implication of economic and cultural networks than she does on Wallerstein’s World Systems, it is not always clear how different the manner in which historians have written about networks, *sans* these deep theoretical musings, differs from her

reliance on Manuel Castells and other proponents of that theory. As Dangler herself states, some of these theoretical approaches (Castells' in particular) aimed to explain present societies and not past ones.

Third, Parts Two and Three of Dangler's book seek to re-examine a discreet set of issues – many of them already well explored by previous historians – in the context of these theoretical approaches. These particular topics are the Islamic trade networks, the nature of travel networks (though in the Islamic and Christian worlds [and even in the Silk Road] these two categories often overlapped), and issues related to “feudalism, slavery, and poverty.” While the theorizing of commercial and travel networks fits perfectly with Dangler's aims the other three themes are far less convincing.

While, on the one hand, most historians of the period (and of these categories) are quite well informed about the nature of intra-faith trade and the complicated commercial networks that linked different areas of the world at specific geographically and chronologically diverse exchange sites (a la Abu Lughod's influential book, or the new histories of the Silk Road by several historians, most notably by Frankopan) without setting them into theoretical frameworks; on the other hand, I found Dangler's descriptions of the travel networks and the reasons for, or categories of, travel (mostly in the Islamic world) quite engaging, relevant, and easily translatable to the modern world.

Furthermore, it may be prudent to note that discussions of “feudalism, slavery, or poverty,” especially in the context of an evolving Iberia, are veritable minefields. These are topics that have been examined and debated over the last three decades almost *ad nauseam* and that are often inflicted with questionable ideological nuances. For one, it is doubtful that the term “feudalism” can be deployed or that it is at all useful to explain social relations in the peninsula. Slavery is another debatable category. Slavery: Where? When? Who? By whom? How did it evolve over time? Poverty is an even more complicated subject in the context of western Christianity, the Islamic world, and the multi-ethnic and religious Iberian Peninsula's views on charity and assistance to the poor or, even, the classification and representations of poverty and the poor. While the author is very careful to note diversity of positions on the subject(s), her dealings with these themes represent more of a summary of received opinion than a close reading and explication of sources.

Her concluding chapters seek to examine, once again in the context of network and world system analysis, the still much-debated issues of overlapping notions of identity and culture in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious (and one should add multi-lingual) worlds of pre-modern Iberia. Here, the author excels. In conclusion, there is much to praise in spite of my comments. Dangler's book is animated by a thorough familiarity with a vast secondary literature. She has exhaustively mined the work of others in the field; most notably the late and much

missed Olivia Remie Constable. Her reading of the secondary literature is always nuanced, generous and polite. If there are small areas of disagreements (and they tend to be small), the author articulates them in a most civil and engaging fashion. True, it may have been better to hear Dangler's voice more often and relegate most of the names of her sources to the footnotes. For example, between pages 23 and 29, a mere 4 ½ pages, the author invokes nineteen different authors (some of them more than once) to buttress her call for a new methodological approach. While Dangler does justice to these scholars, her voice, which we only hear fully in the concluding chapters, is, I think, the most important part of her book.

In spite of these comments, Dangler's book is an excellent reminder that we must approach the history of pre-modern Iberia with great caution. Words have meanings. Words are important. History, now more than ever, matters. Rather than impose notions of geography, chronology, and inter-faith relations that have been mostly generated by our understanding of the modern world, let us, as Dangler proposes, see the past as the people who lived in it and wrote about it did. And, in this regard, no category is as more deserving of revision than that of Muslims and Christians as part of the fluid and shared society of pre-modern Iberia (or, at least, shared for too brief a time).

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