

2012

Review of: Regina Grafe, *Distant Tyranny. Markets, Power, and Backwardness in Spain, 1650-1800*

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Recommended Citation

Mehl, Eva (2012) "Review of: Regina Grafe, *Distant Tyranny. Markets, Power, and Backwardness in Spain, 1650-1800*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1092>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol37/iss1/12>

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Regina Grafe. *Distant Tyranny. Markets, Power, and Backwardness in Spain, 1650-1800*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012. 320 pp.

An economic historian of early modern Spain and the Atlantic World, Regina Grafe (PhD London School of Economics and Political Science, 2001) correctly points out that the slogan “Spain is different” has caused more harm than good to the understanding of Spanish history. Indeed, *Distant Tyranny* attempts to account for the roots of Spanish backwardness without resorting to the cliché that Spain was an exception to the norm. Grafe acknowledges that Spain lagged economically in the 1600s and 1700s, but instead of accepting explanations of high internal transport costs and lack of capital, she looks at how the location and exercise of power hindered economic development. That the Spanish state was characterized by jurisdictional fragmentation is not news for Hispanists (J. H. Elliott elaborated the notion of composite monarchy in the 1960s) but Grafe goes further to show that territorial and municipal taxes and customs added to the cost of exchanging goods and contributed to a slow and regionally diverse process of market integration.

In chapter one Grafe argues that there was no predetermined path to unified nation-states in Europe: Spain did not fail to follow a prescribed model, it just took a different route. Specifically, Grafe takes issue with the divide historians of political economy have established between predatory states with the capacity to maximize revenues and constitutional regimes where a parliament restrained the rulers’ ability to tax. This either-or is meaningless for Grafe, because parliamentary England registered higher tax rates while the supposedly “absolutist” Spain constantly negotiated with the historic territories of Castile and Aragon and the municipalities.

In chapters two and three Grafe argues that, whereas economic historians have generally looked at grain prices, dried and salted codfish (*bacalao*) is actually better suited than bread for the study of market integration. Both bread and salted codfish were staple foods but only *bacalao* was subjected to local consumption and trade taxes. Hence, *bacalao* allows her to analyze to what extent the political economy of taxation affected the price wedge between towns.

In chapter four, Grafe posits that the impact of geography and transportation conditions on Spain’s economic predicament has been exaggerated. Rather, Grafe believes that jurisdictional fragmentation was the biggest factor in

preventing market integration. On the one hand (chapter five), historic territories such as the Basque Provinces and Catalonia resisted eighteenth-century Bourbon attempts of centralization and fiscal unification. On the other hand (chapter six), the ability of municipalities to handle their own fiscal affairs created a plethora of local taxes that impeded price convergence between towns. Grafe contends that an “unusually” strong idea of contractual rule based on reciprocity cost the monarchy dearly in terms of economic progress.

In chapter seven Grafe states that Spain produced less than it could have not because of a scarcity of skills, labor, capital, or natural resources, but because poorly integrated markets led to an inefficient use of available resources. In the eighth and closing chapter Grafe challenges the myth of a “conservative” core and “progressive” peripheries in Spain, alleging that Madrid was more progressive than historically assumed and that the pro-*fueros* attitude of the peripheries was certainly traditional.

The fact that the state tried but could not overcome regional liberties in the peninsula will find echoes among historians of colonial Latin America. The latter are now well acquainted with the idea of a non-absolutist Spanish system of governance whose overseas possessions enjoyed notable local agency. This is a thesis Grafe herself has advanced in recent articles on the colonial fiscal system and the political economy of imperial rule.

The eight chapters smoothly build on each other and gradually develop the author’s argument. However, sometimes the prose is convoluted and charts and quantitative analysis might daunt those not versed in economic and fiscal matters. Minor remarks aside, *Distant Tyranny* is a very stimulating piece because Grafe’s focus on *bacalao* is only an excuse for her to contribute with provocative propositions to a myriad of debates related to historical political economy. The reader sometimes wonders whether the price series of one staple are enough to sustain some of her conclusions, but in general Grafe is convincing and her writing forceful. This reviewer found it particularly refreshing that she relies on numerous local and regional studies written in Spain over the last few decades, a rare trait among Hispanists trained in the US. Grafe’s research hopefully will aid the transatlantic communication between scholars.

In conclusion, *Distant Tyranny* is an audacious contribution to the political economic history of pre-modern Spain. Commendable for grad students and scholars alike, it will be of great interest to specialists in economic and fiscal

history, political and social history, and history of early Modern Spain and early Modern Europe.

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