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Review of Erik Lars Myrup, Power and Corruption in the Early Modern Portuguese World

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Erik Lars Myrup. *Power and Corruption in the Early Modern Portuguese World*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. xi-241 pp.

Sadly, Erick Lars Myrup's *Power and Corruption in the Early Modern Portuguese World* does not live up to the potential of its premise. I use the word "premise" since the book lacks a coherent "thesis." An ominous sign of things to come appears on the first page: "Sustained by a web of human connections, Portugal's mercantile stretched from one end of the globe to the other." One wonders what possible alternative there could be to this proposition. And this is not simply a throwaway line; these amorphous "social networks" are central to the book. Another example is found on the next page: "social networks had always been a central feature of Iberian society" – and in ancient Greece, in Ming China, in modern Zimbabwe, and in all societies at all times. I felt some revival of my hopes when I reached the explicit thesis on page three: "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." Still obvious, but it at least held out the promise that he would expose these subterranean connections to the light of penetrating historical analysis. Alas, my hopes were disappointed here as well.

The book is divided into three sections of two chapters each, and each section examines a different constituent area of the Portuguese empire – Europe, Brazil, and Asia (in reality, Macau) – through the prism of the workings of the Overseas Council, the entity within the structure of the Braganza state that had primary (though not exclusive) jurisdiction over the colonies. The theses of the individual chapters are as banal as that of the book as a whole. Chapter 1: "I argue here that personal connections were vital in molding the political fortunes of both individuals and institutions." How could this statement possibly be untrue? Chapter 2: "I argue that the Overseas Council essentially acted as an institutional gatekeeper and powerbroker." What bureaucratic entity does not play those roles to some degree? Chapter 5: "I argue that Luso-Spanish interaction in East Asia worked largely beneath the structures of formal governments." I doubt many scholars would be shocked by this revelation.

Chapter 3 does have a substantive (if somewhat vague) thesis: "I argue that the great Paulista expeditions of the seventeenth century were not as haphazard and aimless as they are sometimes presented to be." To prove this large point, Myrup only examines the *bandeira* of António Raposo Taveres from 1648 to 1651 during which he travelled deep into the interior of Brazil. Despite the scanty sources on the expedition, Myrup seems determined to cast him as an agent of Portuguese imperialism as such, commissioned by the Overseas Council in Lisbon to contest control of South America from the Spanish (81, 85-87). To his credit, Myrup does note that there is no direct evidence for such a commission,

but cites the speculation of Raposo Taveres' biographer, the late Jaime Cortesão, that he had been given the task by the Overseas Council as indicative that it was probably true. In fact, the five-year gap between Raposo Taveres' return from Lisbon in 1643 and the beginning of the *bandeira* in 1648 – a period Myrup characterizes as “short” (84) – probably indicates the opposite. He ends his argument in favor of an official, though unrecorded, commission by citing a report about the expedition composed by the secretary of the Overseas Council in 1674. Myrup concludes: “Sampaio's report supports the thesis that the tribunal was, if not actively involved, then certainly interested in its [the expedition's] outcome.” (85) He never seems to realize that a report written twenty-six years after the beginning of the expedition and which does not mention the motives for it cannot, in fact, support his thesis. It can only indicate the Overseas Council's interest *after the fact*. I mention this only as an example of Myrup's tendency not to ask some basic questions of the evidence he cites, in this case, chronology.

The case study of Raposo Taveres highlights another problem with this study. Myrup begins and ends each chapter with an anecdote about a particular individual who is, supposedly, illustrative of the theme or thesis being covered in the chapter. Sadly, few of his examples are particularly revealing of the points he tries to make. Fortunately, he abandons this gimmick for Chapter 2, not mentioning the framing individual after the first two pages, and produces what is easily the strongest chapter of the book, and which contains the foundations of what could be a much-needed institutional history of the Overseas Council. The raw material for a more substantive study of Portuguese colonialism is here, but it is often not well utilized. To cite the most egregious example of this problem, Chapter 6 had the makings of a penetrating examination of Luso-Chinese relations in Macau. However, it is bedeviled by a convoluted organization that constantly takes many detours – some wholly irrelevant – to tell the story of Zhang Rulin, the Qing magistrate tasked in investigate the deaths of two Chinese subjects in Macau in 1748. By my count, Myrup has to return to the same scene of Zhang Rulin waiting to enter Macau some nine times in the course of this thirty-two page chapter because he goes off on so many tangents.

But the central problem of this book is its banality. To say that the Portuguese colonial state cannot be understood purely in formal terms is to simply restate a widely-acknowledged truth that the absolutist state was a more much negotiated entity than its rhetoric would indicate. Indeed, he even acknowledges (kind of) that his approach is not original, citing the work of his own mentor, Stuart B. Schwartz, from the 1970's, among others (5), but he goes on anyway to retread this well-worn path. To be fair, the book does adequately recount the vicissitudes of individuals at the center and in the peripheries of the Portuguese colonial world. But an insightful and revealing deep prosopography of the subterranean networks of patronage and clientage, amity and enmity, selfishness

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and duty that shaped real outcomes for the Portuguese empire would have provided us with a more profound understanding of Portuguese colonialism.

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