Berry on Caraccioli, 'Writing the New World: The Politics of Natural History in the Early Spanish Empire'

Review published on Wednesday, August 25, 2021


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Mauro José Caraccioli’s new book explores sixteenth-century imperial Spanish natural history as “a field of scientific storytelling,” a theater for the entangled development of early modern European natural philosophy and political thought, and a genre worthy of greater study by political theorists interested in both (p. 132). He examines several seminal authors as they attempted “to envision a new kind of society” through narratives of wonder at the natural world (p. 131). While Caraccioli’s call for greater attention to works from the Spanish Americas as contributors to transformations in early modern science and political thought is not entirely novel, his close focus on how politics, imperial domination, and inquiry were intertwined with natural history makes a compelling case for greater inclusion of these works into the political science canon.

Following an overview chapter that walks through three major phases in sixteenth-century Spanish natural history—highlighting authors, tropes, evidentiary bases, and overall impact on interpretations of nature with a helpful organizing table—the book is structured around each of these “constitutive narratives of natural history” (p. 23). This organization is also shaped by the key writers Caraccioli examines as pivotal to each phase, each of whom are moderately to very well known to historians of the period.

Chapter 2 contrasts the interpretations of nature put forward by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo in *Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias* (1526) and Bartolomé de Las Casas in *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (1552), each as a “naturalist epic” (p. 41). While these two men differed strongly in their conclusions, both described the natural world in the Americas as a strange and timeless landscape fundamentally different from the Old World. For Oviedo, the “oddities and monstrosities” of the Americas pointed to demonic influence that could be defeated through conquest; for Las Casas, “utopian descriptions” of wonderous and untouched landscapes contributed to his arguments on the nature of indigenous peoples and the destructive influence of the Spanish (pp. 27, 53). Politically, both interpretations of nature were part of projects aimed to influence action taken by the Crown toward these new colonies.

In chapter 3, Caraccioli closely examines book 11, “Earthly Things,” of Bernardino de Sahagún’s monumental *Florentine Codex* (1545-90). He argues that this work, with its combination of
experiential evidence and knowledge from the Nahua informants who answered Sahagún’s lengthy questionnaires on natural resources, sat uneasily with the Franciscan missionary’s stated anthropological goal of extirpating indigenous religious practices.

The final two chapters are the strongest, as Caraccioli explores the works and political struggles of Francisco Hernández de Toledo from his 1570s Crown-funded expedition, as well as the much more successful Jesuit missionary and naturalist José de Acosta. Caraccioli argues that both authors, despite their divergent fortunes within the empire, had a significant influence on the development of natural philosophy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Specifically, both authors approached nature as “a bearer of secrets” that could be read, understood, and (re)classified through learned exploration and observation rather than reliance on classical authorities (p. 116). While Hernández’s extensive research was unpublished in his lifetime, Acosta himself made use of it, along with his own experiences in the Americas, to write Historia natural y moral de las Indias (1590); in turn, Acosta’s work became a “standard reference for seventeenth-century thinkers,” such as Francis Bacon and John Locke (p. 106). Caraccioli highlights telling passages from Acosta that emphasize the intellectual liberation and wonder he experienced through exploration and observation in the Americas.

With the emphasis throughout on personal experience as a claim to authority, Caraccioli takes part in a larger and ongoing conversation in the history of science emphasizing evidentiary knowledge originating in colonial Americas. This turn in the field highlights the multidirectional flow of both knowledge and practice along Atlantic and indeed global networks; in doing so, scholars pursuing this work have expanded studies of contributors and active shapers of ideas along these networks to include Amerindians, Africans, and European-descended creoles in the Americas. In this context, Caraccioli’s call for sixteenth-century Spanish naturalists to be taken more seriously is fitting but relies heavily on similar and longstanding calls and works by other scholars including Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Anthony Pagden. This is not necessarily a flaw; all scholarly works stand on the shoulders of others, after all. However, the power of the stated intervention of this book depends largely on the field from which a reader approaches it. There is perhaps less that is new in here for historians of early modern science and the sixteenth-century Spanish Americas than there is for political scientists. However, Caraccioli’s primary goal is to persuade his fellow political theorists to expand their canon on early modern European political thought and end the “scholarly exclusion” of imperial Spain within this field—certainly a worthwhile goal (p. 134). His contribution here is on the emphasis of natural history as a political genre fundamentally centered on narratives that made sense of the past and recommendations for future action in this new colonial environment.

In making this case for the political significance of these works, Caraccioli homes in on the dissonance displayed by these sixteenth-century authors, who, while very much a part of imperial conquest, conversion, and rule, were more than solely the handmaidens of empire. He remains clear-eyed on the cultural imperialism of these men to be sure, while arguing that “the goal of naturalizing empire was as much about letting the wonders of the earth shine through as it was about religious, cultural, and military domination” (p. 136). While authors like Sahagún, Acosta, and the rest were each “firm believers in the spiritual objectives of their mission,” their experiences among what they perceived as marvels of the Americas altered their perspective as expressed in their works (p. 137).

Caraccioli returns to this sense of moral wonder in his epilogue, as he expands his intervention into a
wider call for examining natural history as a genre of political thought with “contemporary moral and political relevance” as we all today face the environmental challenge of how to balance “planet, people, and profit” (pp. 137, 129). Caraccioli links narrative constructions and tropes about nature—for example, on nature as an autonomous entity—between these sixteenth-century works and contemporary environmental politics. As a historian, I wanted more on the context and connective tissue of these relationships over time, an undertaking that would require a much greater scope and may primarily reflect disciplinary differences.

Caraccioli is right to call for greater consideration of imperial Spanish thinkers; however, as he himself notes, the works he examines are “only a small part of a much larger tapestry that needs reconstruction” (p. 138). This book stands as an open and compelling invitation for future interdisciplinary investigation into this complicated moral and environmental tapestry and its many weavers.


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