

Book Review

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Orlando Bentancor. 2017 *The Matter of Empire: Metaphysics and Mining in Colonial Peru*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

The Matter of Empire is a dense but important contribution to the fields of Spanish imperial intellectual history and the history of science and empire. Bentancor builds upon the work of Anthony Pagden and Rolena Adorno on the legitimizing ideologies of empire within Spanish thought and literature, with the intent of demonstrating that such ideologies were built upon a metaphysical foundation. Focusing on mining in the imperial imagination, Bentancor shows that mineral wealth was not only the object of worldly materialism, but that it also, as matter, provided a metaphysical base for imperial apologists.

After a very heavy introduction laying the theoretical foundation of his interpretation, in five chapters Bentancor walks the reader through some of the principal legal thinkers of the early empire. He begins with the jurist Francisco de Vitoria, whose *De Indis* was the first major attempt to legitimize the empire when, in the early 16th century, it became increasingly obvious that the papal distribution of the New World was not defensible by civil law. *De Indis* instead sought to found the empire on reason and natural law. Through a detailed exegesis of Vitoria's interpretations of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, Bentancor shows that Thomist notions of matter and *techné*, or technique, served as the grounding metaphors for Vitoria. In sum, the world is made of imperfect matter in need of a more perfect form. And therefore, as the artisan stands before his creation, God stands before the world, and Spain stands before its empire. In this way, the empire exists not for its own ends or out of grace, but for the common good.

Bentancor calls such reasoning "metaphysical instrumentalism," and the rest of the book charts the *inherent* "impasses" that this logic generates. Chapter 2 revisits the famous debate of 1550-51 in Valladolid between Bartolomé de las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda, which Bentancor interprets as fundamentally over this distinction between matter and form. Both polemicists agreed that the raw material of the Indian was far from attaining its completion; but how shall a more perfect form be pressed upon him? Will the form befitting Spanish civilization be applicable to New World peoples regardless of how incapable they are of attaining it (Sepúlveda)? Or does the

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uniqueness of Indian society mean it requires a novel and distinct form to carry it to maturation (Las Casas)?

The next two chapters bring us to the heart of the book, and here Bentancor is at his best. Chapter 3 follows the Jesuit scholar José de Acosta, whose work represents the apotheosis of Bentancor's metaphysical instrumentalism. By Acosta's age, the empire had significantly matured from chaotic conquest era to the systematic extraction of precious metals. In this context, the pressing intellectual concern was no longer justifying the conquest, but instead shifted to the problem of proper governance. Unlike most of his predecessors, Acosta brushed aside the judgment that Indians were "slaves by nature" and instead saw them as fundamentally improvable, and, in theory, quite capable of achieving the exalted civilization of the Spaniard. The problem was not their nature but their culture. This ideology gained implementation in the reforms of the Peruvian viceroy Francisco de Toledo (1571-73), who congregated Indians into *reducciones* and introduced the *mita* policy of forced labor in the silver mines. Chapter 4 then addresses three well-known texts of the 1570s that sought to explain and justify Toledo's reforms. Here, Bentancor's objective is to show that the impetus of these reforms came not from the metropole, but from the colony; rather than following the directives of the sovereign, "the machinery of the empire started to become an independent entity." (227) The significance of this for Bentancor is that while the theory of metaphysical instrumentalism held that a subject applied to imperfect matter an improving form towards the end of the common good, in the matured empire, the colony has taken a life of its own. Rather than being the means towards an end, the self-perpetuation of the colony becomes the end in itself. Chapter 5 then concludes the book examining Juan de Solórzano Pereira's *Política indiana* (1648), the last major *apología* for empire. With the empire unmistakably in decline, the faith that empire conforms to reason and natural law had abated and metaphysical instrumentalism "collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions" (296). No longer able to defend the empire on ecclesiastic, civil, or natural grounds, Solórzano settled on a modern, utopian formula: the empire is good for what it one day will become.

Bentancor has his sights aimed high. He argues that we hold with these thinkers nothing less than the birth of modernity. This nascent metaphysical instrumentalism, he writes, contains the central tension of modernity between the logic of technological domination (Heidegger) and that of "deterritorializing excess" (or, more commonly, commodification of surplus value for capital accumulation; Marx). The *mita* and the silver mines were supposed to be the *means* for achieving a worthy and natural *end*; however, they also created the free-flowing silver that financed the first age of global capitalism, and in so doing, gained a life of its own. Bentancor tries to show the ideological components of this in the correspondences and analogies of Acosta and Solórzano to argue that silver was not mere base matter -- the object of avarice -- but rather a propagating, exalted, almost magical mineral.

The strengths of the book are many, and for historians of Spanish intellectual history and science it is an important read. This is because of the daring way that it attempts to unite metaphysics with imperial reasoning, thereby pointing one way that Latin Americanists might bridge the considerable gulf that persists between materialist social and economic history and intellectual

and cultural scholarship. Yet, as the reader of this review can probably deduce, the greatest fault of the book is the abstruse vocabulary as well as the tedium of some of the chapters. A shorter book that assumed less about the reader's familiarity with Spanish intellectual history would have reached a larger audience. Iberian intellectual and scientific historiography has in the last two decades grown into an exciting and dynamic field; our greatest challenge, however, remains to gain the attention of scholars of the "modern" empires and the bearers of the standard narrative of scientific development. While Bentancor's book draws some connections and deserves the attention of historians of the British, French, and Dutch empires, the style of his exposition is not likely expand its readership.

Finally, Bentancor leaves plenty of room to question his grander conclusions concerning the origin of modernity. More, every graduate student will find it easy to quibble with the primacy of the intellectual sphere in this narrative: feminist and post-colonial genealogies of ideas have taught us that logics do not collapse under their own weight. Nonetheless, such routine criticisms of intellectual history should not distract us from the doors that Bentancor opens for further exploration through his detailed interpretations. Since the early work of Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (1998, 2002), historians have sought ways to understand the epistemological or "scientific" conditions of the Spanish Empire. We have now a number of excellent monographs on the early colonial period and the late eighteenth century; Spain's Baroque period, however, has remained a particular challenge. Bentancor helps to show that building the empire on the foundation of extracting precious metals was not a wholly unintellectual crude form of empire. Rather, it did correspond to a specific logic of metaphysics. It remains, however, for future historians to define and refine the political and social entanglements of logic and its transformations.