

Forum

We, the King: Creating Royal Legislation in the Sixteenth-Century Spanish New World. By ADRIAN MASTERS. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 319 pages. LCCN 2022057091. \$117.00 hardback, \$39.99 paperback.

Adrian Masters has written a highly relevant book not only for the historiography of the Spanish Empire but also for the broader understanding of all early modern empires, one that in turn profoundly impacts the traditional debate about the birth of the modern state. His work feeds discussions on the nature of political power in the early modern period, the various legal formulas that shaped the formation of imperial aggregates, and it further delves into classic questions about the transition from empires to nations and the memory of those empires in the nations' present. *We, the King: Creating Royal Legislation in the Sixteenth-Century Spanish New World* is part of an ongoing renewal of historiography in English on early modern empires and the Atlantic, a shift that has left behind totalizing visions based on centralizing or binary logics that were often teleological. This renewal includes recent books by Adolfo Polo y La Borda, Santiago Muñoz-Arbeláez, and Chloe Ireton, among others.¹ Within this group, Masters addresses a crucial problem for understanding the Spanish Empire: the creation of royal legislation in an increasingly complex pluricontinental polity.

Masters's book stands at the intersection of political and legal history, an almost imperceptible distinction, as all scholars who work on these matters are well aware. The argument of *We, the King* is clear: the legislation that sustained the Spanish Empire was not constructed from the top down, as an imposition by the king and his councils upon subjects on both sides of the Atlantic. Instead, Masters proposes a bottom-up alternative for understanding the construction of the empire's political and legal realities, taking into account all aspects of what he calls "the legal fiction of vassal-lord dialogue" (156) as well as a kind of "legal alchemy" (77). The book seeks to unravel a complete process of lawmaking and the creation of government documents, which the author rightly identifies as often underexplored by legal history. The result is a multifaceted book that uses Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory to gauge the presence of multiple "actants" (23) in the creation of imperial law. It also draws, very effectively, on the paradigm of *empowering interactions*, defined in 2009 by Blockmans, Holenstein, and Mathieu.² By expanding the notion of actor, here no longer limited to powerful individuals involved in negotiating and drafting laws, and by emphasizing the power of multiple

¹ Santiago Muñoz-Arbeláez, *The New Kingdom of Granada: The Making and Unmaking of Spain's Atlantic Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2025); Adolfo Polo y La Borda, *Global Servants of the Spanish King: Mobility and Cosmopolitanism in the Early Modern Spanish Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); Chloe L. Ireton, *Slavery & Freedom in Black Thought in the Early Spanish Atlantic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

² Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Wim Blockmans, André Holenstein, and Jon Mathieu, eds., *Empowering Interactions: Political Cultures and the Emergence of the State in Europe, 1300–1900* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

interactions in political action, *We, the King* opens up an exploration of the various procedures and steps that shaped the entire process of law-making and imperial governance.

The structure of the book, from the prelude to the epilogue, is guided by the transatlantic journey of Pedro Rengifo, a Peruvian son of a conquistador and an Indigenous woman, who was charged with transporting the petition of 10,000 mestizos requesting permission to be ordained as priests. This episode allows the author to gauge the power of government documents in constructing the social reality of the Spanish Empire's American spaces. The unification of a broad group of individuals under the category "mestizos" invites us to consider that social, religious, racial, or ethnic categories and identities were not vertically determined, as idealized by the logic of *castas* or the notion of the two republics (already addressed by Masters in a widely circulated article).³ Instead, *We, the King* demonstrates a far more complex reality in which subjects of the Crown, no matter how distant they were from the so-called centers of power, geographically or socially, had a certain capacity to influence the laws and policies implemented. The agents who made this possible, following Latour's influential work, were diverse and not limited to individuals or collective groups. Masters deploys remarkable historical imagination to unpack the details of how petitions were created and executed and the many actants involved.

The first chapter focuses on those involved in making the fiction of vassal-monarch communication effective, through notarial powers that required translators and various proxies, developments that ultimately expanded the "trust in the validity and integrity of the empire's communications systems" (79). This transformation was made possible by the infrastructure of petition-making, which is the subject of the second chapter. The logistics of transportation, which were "not a detail but a central problem for the transmission of petitions to Iberia," (79) come to the forefront. Storms, ships, and even mules are considered actants of empire and key components in the construction of imperial bureaucracy. Chapter three offers a gendered approach to the construction of the Council of the Indies—and the subsequent reforms of 1542 and 1571—highlighting the role of women "intentionally and often inadvertently, in prompting the council's move away from pure patrimonialism" (113). Masters develops a subtle analysis of how mentalities were transformed and adapted within institutions often perceived as monolithic. Chapters four and five are connected in exploring the impact of the council's sedentarization beginning in 1561. That chronological shift shaped "ministers' and subalterns' everyday practices, their decision-making technologies, and their social milieu" (158). These chapters address the debate between case-based and systemic lawmaking, offering an alternative vision grounded in the pragmatism of officials before 1561 and the power and value of the archive after that date. Chapter six

³ Adrian Masters, "The Two, the One, the Many, the None: Rethinking the Republics of Spaniards and Indians in the Sixteenth-Century Spanish Indies," *The Americas* 78, no. 1 (January 2021): 3–36.

makes a striking discovery: “officials tended to insert considerable intact parts of petitioners’ phraseology verbatim or near-verbatim into the empire’s most important legislative documents” (223). Here, Masters engages with the material production of texts, “deconstructing and constructing the royal decree” (225) and establishes an analytical model that dialogues with recent scholarship on record-keeping as a powerful political act.⁴

We, the King is a truly important book that reshapes our understanding of daily politics in the early Spanish Empire while addressing broader questions such as the nature and extent of political power, approaches to difference in the early modern world, and the extreme complexity of Atlantic societies. It is beautifully written and thoroughly researched, and it stands as a landmark not only for students and researchers of history but also for anyone interested in the nature of power and in historiographical debates on record-keeping and archival epistemologies.

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⁴ For the debate, see Giora Sternberg, “Writing to Undo: Protestation as a Mode of Early Modern Resistance,” *The American Historical Review* 128, no. 1 (2023): 214–48.