

Reseña

Jesús Astigarraga. *A Unifying Enlightenment. Institutions of Political Economy in Eighteenth-Century Spain (1700-1808)*. Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2020, 321 pp. ISBN 9789004442894.

Research on the economic history of the 18th-century Spanish Empire has experienced a profound and inspiring innovation during the last years. Studies on market integration (Grafe, Pérez Sarrión), the fiscal-military and the contractor state (Torres Sánchez, Rodríguez Hernández, Solbes Ferri, González Enciso) and merchant networks (Crespo Solana, Lamikiz) have enhanced not only the understanding of the 18th-century Spanish economy, but have created important methodological legacies for future research. Jesús Astigarraga's book intervenes in this multi-layered research debate from a perspective that combines the research on economic policy with intellectual history concerning the enlightenment. The study's aim is to analyze the evolution of institutions of Spain's Political Economy during the 18th century. In contrast to classical political history or New Institutional Economics Astigarraga's understanding of institutions is much wider framing them as a broad set of mechanisms including "a dense network of economic societies and trade consulates, [...] university chairs in political economy and commerce, a state bank and an official agency for economic development and statistics" (p. 3). This definition serves as a framework for the dense study, in which one central aspect is absent, namely economic ideas and discourses.

Two main guidelines characterize the study: First, it shows how a genuine economic discourse emerged through the reception of economic writings from French, British, Dutch, Italian and German authors. In contrast to classic intellectual history, Astigarraga neatly connects this discourse with the socio-economic and political contexts, while showing the international circulations, transfers and appropriation of economic ideas and concepts. Second, the book intervenes in the discussion on Polycentric Monarchies by pointing out that Bourbon reforms led to a more "rational" centralization of "decision-making" (p. 13), but relying on an improved transmission of information from the regions to the newly empowered political center in Madrid. Thus, the Bourbon state deliberately created a "polycentric", regionalized web of economic institutions which were the carriers and protagonists of the economic discourse (pp. 14, 21). The book is structured in ten chapters which cover the period between the turn from the 17th century until the eve of the Constitution of Cadiz. While the chapters basically follow a chronological structure, some chapters' time spans overlap with one another showing parallel developments of different discourses and ideas.

Chapter 1 scrutinizes the role of Merchant handbooks published between the late 17th century and the 1750s in redefining commercial affairs as mathematical knowledge in partial

substitution of moral and juridical ideas. The handbooks reflected the polycentric structure of the Spanish economy displaying regionally differentiated knowledge on currencies, weights and measures, in particular in Catalonia and Aragon. At the same time, they advanced to important disseminators of knowledge on the first Bourbon reform phase thus substituting the lacking commercial press and the weak degree of public economic discourse.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the emergence of a public discourse on commerce, by newly-founded commercial newspapers during the 1750s and 1760s. While most of these projects were rather short-lived, depended on central institutions' financial support and served once again as disseminators of government-leaning ideas, they contributed decisively to coining a "science of commerce" properly understood as a state-designed commercial policy that mediated between private particular interests and abusive bureaucratic practices. The influence of foreign writings, mainly in France, Great Britain and the Netherlands, appears to be decisive, although the most persistent concepts were those who experienced an adoption to Spanish conditions.

Chapter 4 deals with the foundation of Economic Societies since the 1770s and of new Merchant Guilds, both in Spain and in Spanish America. While the latter were spurred by the *libre comercio* reforms, the former represented a turning point in Spain's domestic economic policy shifting stronger towards fostering regional economic development including proto-industries. While Astigarraga points out that the clear-cut divergence between an industrial party to be identified with the Economic Societies, and a mercantile party prolonging Spain's agricultural character identified with Merchant Guilds is too simple, he shows how the discourse of Economic Societies introduced a new model of economic growth, which, however, did not succeed. At the same time, the Economic Societies, were important in establishing a commercial press thus contributing to a public sphere in late 18th-century Spain.

This issue is picked up again and continued in Chapters 6, 7 and 10: These chapters show the structural conservatism and the limit of Bourbon reformism in the late 18th century: Thus, the foundation of the newspaper *Memorial Literario* between the mid-1780s and the first decade of the 19th century, served the dissemination of the late reform discourse (Chapter 6). In turn, it is shown by two short-lived newspapers in the second half of the 1780s that the commercial press spread also more ground-breaking reform ideas, eventually embracing calls for political freedom, and in consequence were closed down (Chapter 7). Finally, the foundation of the *Correo Mercantil de España y sus Indias* was a successful publication project, precisely because its perspective remained well within the traditional framework of Spain's colonial trade policy (Chapter 10).

Chapter 5 shows the evolution of commercial dictionaries in Spain, parallel to the emergence of Economic Societies and the commercial press from the 1770s. While heavily drawing on the French model, these dictionaries aimed to provide general information to merchants for them to calculate transactions and their risks thus contributing to shrinking transaction costs. This distinguished them from Merchants' handbooks whose aim had focused on the education of traders.

Chapters 8 and 9 deal with the institutionalization of economic knowledge through the foundation of Chairs in Political Economy at universities and their role in training bureaucrats between the mid-1780s and 1808 and the use of Merchants' handbooks in commercial schools for training traders between the 1760s and the early 1800s. Both developments show that commerce as a profession was well-established by the early 19th century surviving well after the derogation of the Cadiz constitution and the return to a Monarchical government.

In sum, Astigarraga's book offers a highly interesting perspective on the 18th-century Spanish economic, political and intellectual history. In particular, the chapters on Merchant handbooks and commercial dictionaries explore hardly-known aspects and close an important research gap considering the generation and dissemination of knowledge in trade business. Also, the book is impressive in the wide array of analyzed sources and their pre-

cise and knowledgeable interpretation within the intellectual, social and economic contexts. The book's international perspective makes the work an interesting reading experience also for intellectual historians. The work might have gained by a more explicit reflection on the definition of institutions, and a debate with the much-discussed framework of New Institutional Economics including a critique why this kind of framework is too narrow to grasp many of the knowledge- and culture-related aspects of economies as this seems to correspond quite neatly to the book's argument. While Astigarraga takes a middle position in the Polycentric Monarchies debate, his logic of narration is sometimes leaning toward the centre, as in the reform attempt of Basque custom duties 1778-81. This aspect regards even more Spanish America, which is present only as an issue of discussion, not as space of agency. These critical remarks do not contradict the highly positive impression of the book which is a major contribution to Spain's economic discourse in the 18th-century, due to its international perspective and a precise and sophisticated analysis of a wide array of sources.

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