

## REVIEW

### **On Power, Order and Prudence In Early Modern Spanish Political Thought.**

**Braun, Harold E. 2007.** *Juan de Mariana and Early Modern Spanish Political Thought.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

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Harold Braun's *Juan de Mariana and Early Modern Spanish Political Thought* widens the perspectives and references on political power, authority and the state in early modern Europe, since it is safe to maintain that late medieval and early modern Spain constitute a noteworthy absence in much of contemporary political theory, especially in northern Europe. Braun's main purpose is to reconsider the political ideas of Juan de Mariana, with emphasis on his mayor work *De rege et regis institutione libri tres*. This book was published in 1599 as an instruction to Philip III of Spain regarding the principles of good statecraft. Mariana was a Jesuit, a political thinker, a historian and a theologian. Even though his areas of interest deal with the principles and limits of both secular and clerical power, he is much more concerned with the former, which is a point Braun also emphasises throughout his study.

Mariana distinguishes himself in a number of respects from other Spanish political thinkers of the time, especially from fellow Jesuits such as Pedro de Ribadeneira. Mariana does not, for example, dwell on Divine Providence as a component of good statecraft and political

action. Nor does he fiercely accuse Machiavelli of representing a pernicious view of the political sphere, too far from religious authority and virtues. It is moreover difficult to place Mariana in an archetypically early modern Spanish scholastic tradition along with, for example, Francisco de Vitoria, Francisco Suárez and Domingo de Soto, since he departs from the legal idiom of the scholastics to adopt a particular reason and rhetoric of state.

Braun takes issue with what has been the ideas traditionally associated with Mariana's political writings: an apology of regicide, a doctrine of radical sovereignty and a precursor to modern constitutional thought. Braun holds that it is difficult to conclude that *De rege* supports the idea of religiously sanctioned regicide, as the clerical institutions might help to create political stability under some circumstances, as "guardians of the realm", but should under no circumstances raise claims to rule the *res publica*. The assertion that Mariana considers regicide a legitimate result of popular sovereignty is also refuted by Braun. He argues that Mariana does admit the possibility of regicide, which does not imply that the killing of the ruler is decided upon by an infallible popular will. The prince needs to be prudent in order to preserve the *res publica*, which also is the basis of his power. Mariana holds a rather pessimistic view of the moral and political capacity of the prince, who runs the constant risk of being corrupted by circumstance and history. Therefore, the mere possibility of regicide has a necessary and positive effect on powerful and potentially corrupt princes, making them rule in a more prudent manner out of personal necessity and out of sheer fear. Prudence is related to self-restraint in the ruler, who ultimately will have to realise that his power is only safe when it is restrained by himself. Mariana's idea of regicide is, as Braun convincingly points out, linked to notions about how to most efficiently create and maintain political order by restraining the ruler, rather than to ideas of religious authority, popular resistance or absolute sovereignty.

The ultimate locus of political power is not to be found exclusively in the king nor in the populus, and Mariana insistently refuses to resolve this question in definitive terms. He comes to the conclusion that hereditary monarchy is the best regime, solely because it has been the most efficient form of government to serve the purpose of preserving political stability. The priority of dynastic monarchy is not derived from an imperious need of absolute sovereignty, located in the king and authorised once and for all by the people.

According to Mariana, it is moreover futile to think that the tension between ruler and ruled could be resolved by resorting to juridical argument. Good statecraft by which the political order is maintained depends on prudence drawn from historical exempla, rather than from overarching juridical principles. Juridical procedure cannot resolve fundamental tensions related to political order, authority and legitimacy. Historical experience shows us that where there is no effective power, law is of no use. Nor does medieval customary law serve as a guarantee for political order, since it is constantly manipulated both by the ruler and the ruled. The contingency of law and custom guarantee that neither the authority of the monarch nor that of the people is resistant to the degeneration of history and the wickedness of man. Juridical arguments are by Mariana overtrumped by personal reasoning and judgement of the ruler based on historical experience. As Braun persistently points out, attending to these arguments it is quite difficult to define Mariana as a proto constitutionalist thinker.

Mariana's recurring ideas about the intrinsic instability of the political sphere are in turn related to his view of history as human degeneration and the definitive loss of an harmonious relationship between ruler and ruled. This original relation is definitively of this world, and so is its constant degeneration through historical time. Mariana's pessimism is in many aspects Augustinian, but its emphasis is much more worldly and with decisive consequences for his view of statecraft and the *res publica*. One of the most interesting points in Braun's reconsideration of Mariana's thought is the inherent contingency of the relation between ruler, ruled and the political order in the early modern polity.

The central Spanish political and intellectual settings in Braun's book on Juan de Mariana are not new nor unknown to scholars who specialise in early modern political thought. They are however frequently absent in contemporary political theory, as they are often viewed through the lenses of historiography understood as the study of events confined to the past. On the other hand, in disciplines such as political theory, when conceptual and genealogical perspectives are in focus, the references made to the history of political thought in early modern Europe are frequently constrained by certain limitations in scope, with the Spanish setting as a noteworthy absence. Examples of such limitations can be observed in university textbooks, where the account of early modern western political thought starts with Machia-

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velli, and then focuses on thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau, to end in the proximities of Kant. A much wider array of thinkers might be mentioned, but most of them are not described as having any decisive bearing on the central political ideas and concepts related to the modern polity. There is no doubt that the writings of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Kant have made very important contributions to our understanding of the political sphere. The emphasis on some approaches and thinkers and the exclusion of others are in the best case obvious, inevitable and illuminating.

The rationalisation and economisation of themes in undergraduate textbooks might be legitimate and necessary, but the same kinds of tendencies in research are more problematic. This is not to say that all scholarly effort in disciplines like political theory assume the same limitations as undergraduate textbooks. We find enquiries on a large number of thinkers, concepts and epochs in contemporary political theory and adjacent fields. There are albeit some general tendencies to repetition and (self-imposed) restrictions concerning in what historical contexts we should look, what thinkers we should consider and what we should ask about the foundations of the modern polity. These restrictions are not necessarily part of ideological debates on alleged canons or anti-canons in political thought. The process of selection and exclusion of research questions is unavoidable, and a necessary consequence of interest and specialisation. In disciplines like political theory it is moreover impossible to establish clear-cut positions in supposedly dialectical debates between canons and anti-canons concerning the history of western political thought. The relevant issue is in this sense not whether political theory is selective, but rather if it is excessively *repetitive* in its scope concerning the concepts related to the theory and history of modern political power. A subsequent question is whether this repetition might leave political theory with some *internal* blind spots regarding the genealogy of the state. The main point is not claim a more or less favourable position for this or that author in the history of political thought, but rather to consider a wider array of influences, contestations and contexts concerning such complex entities as the modern state.

Braun's perspective is undeniably historical, with emphasis on the Spanish and Castilian late medieval and early modern context. His account of this political and intellectual context is informed and well documented, which in itself serves a significant purpose to shed

light on an important early modern setting. Some pressing issues in Braun's book point in the direction of the intricate theoretical tensions between political entities such as empire and the modern state. These tensions can be exemplified by the formation of the Spanish polity, which during several centuries has been viewed simultaneously as (at least) a composite monarchy, a territorial state, one of two rival empires in the Iberian peninsula, and a Global/Transatlantic/Mediterranean expanding empire. The contextualisation cannot be considered to be closed but rather open-ended, as the concepts dealt with obviously reach far beyond the historical exempla related to the Spanish Habsburgian monarchy. This point could have been more expressively argued by Braun, who even though he constantly indicates the important relations to a wider theoretical setting, remains close to the Spanish and Castilian case.

The specificity of Mariana's writings on the Spanish monarchy might be viewed as a point of departure both historically and theoretically for two main reasons. Firstly, because the expanding Spanish state and empire constitute an exceptionally powerful early modern political setting whose influence cannot be reduced to Spain as confined to the Iberian peninsula (which in itself represents a quite complex political context). Secondly, and even more important; because the political concepts related to this expanding state and empire are intimately linked to general questions concerning the locus of political power. These questions are *both* historical *and* theoretical, since they arise in specific past contexts but continue to have bearing on how political concepts such as order, authority, sovereignty and the state are conceived in and adjusted to the present.