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Review of Ruth Ruth Mackay and Sir John Elliott,
*The Limits of Royal Authority: Resistance and
Obedience in Seventeenth-Century Castile*

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Review of Ruth Mackay and Sir John Elliott, *The Limits of Royal Authority: Resistance and Obedience in Seventeenth-Century Castile*

Abstract

During the 1640s, many Spaniards and Europeans believed that something was going terribly wrong in the Spanish monarchy. Signs of general discontent were widespread, as demonstrated by insurgent political movements in Catalonia (1640), Portugal (1640), and Naples (1647–48). In addition, between roughly 1620 and 1650 the Spanish monarchy was embroiled in an endless and debilitating “global war,” with its armies battling across Europe, America, and Asia. Many of these tensions and conflicts were linked to the attempts of the Spanish government, led by Philip IV (1621–1665) and his favorite, and prime minister, the Count-Duke of Olivares, to introduce reforms aimed at creating what was known at the time as a “regular state,” a centralized monarchy in which the king reigned supreme. Although tensions began to abate after the fall of Olivares in 1643, it should not surprise anyone that the 1640s were a period during which many of Philip IV’s subjects believed that the Spanish monarchy was on the verge of total collapse.

Disciplines

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activity had certain drawbacks. In fact, on reading Justice and Liberty's programmatic documents on, say, the new form the postfascist Italian state was to take, one is left, beyond the movement's basic premise of creating a series of autonomous units of self-government, with a very vague impression of what these units would actually look like and what they would be inspired by.

One of the ongoing questions of Italian political culture bears on what often seems to be the unbridgeable separation between intellectuals and the masses and how this beggars the political role of the former. No matter how brilliant the program, how talented the intellectuals, little will happen if no one is listening or if political proposals are put forward in forms or in a language that is inaccessible to a larger public. For all his genius and acumen, Rosselli's thought had little impact on the Italy of the 1930s, and although it served as inspiration for the liberal socialist resistance fighters in the Action Party a decade later, the ambitious aims these partisans set for themselves were soon to be dashed by what has become known as the postwar Restoration. Paradoxically, Rosselli's thought, which was rooted in the fascist Italy of the 1930s and sought to be an antidote to the ills which had produced fascism, has taken on more relevance seventy years later than when it was formulated.

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The Limits of Royal Authority: Resistance and Obedience in Seventeenth-

Century Castile. By *Ruth Mackay*. Cambridge Studies in Early Modern History.

Edited by *Sir John Elliott* et al.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xi + 193. \$59.95.

During the 1640s, many Spaniards and Europeans believed that something was going terribly wrong in the Spanish monarchy. Signs of general discontent were widespread, as demonstrated by insurgent political movements in Catalonia (1640), Portugal (1640), and Naples (1647–48). In addition, between roughly 1620 and 1650 the Spanish monarchy was embroiled in an endless and debilitating “global war,” with its armies battling across Europe, America, and Asia. Many of these tensions and conflicts were linked to the attempts of the Spanish government, led by Philip IV (1621–1665) and his favorite, and prime minister, the Count-Duke of Olivares, to introduce reforms aimed at creating what was known at the time as a “regular state,” a centralized monarchy in which the king reigned supreme. Although tensions began to abate after the fall of Olivares in 1643, it should not surprise anyone that the 1640s were a period during which many of Philip IV's subjects believed that the Spanish monarchy was on the verge of total collapse.

Throughout these troubled times Castile, the core of the Spanish monarchy and the kingdom that suffered most from the policies of Philip IV and Olivares, stayed loyal to the Crown, puzzling contemporaries and historians alike. There were crises, conflicts, and conspiracies, but in the end Castile remained a devoted kingdom from which the Spanish Crown obtained support to wage war against other European polities and the dissident kingdoms of Portugal and Catalonia. Conventional explanations for the alleged “exceptionalism” of Castile portrayed a kingdom lacking the institutions and traditions that would have enabled it to rebel against royal absolutism. Recently, however, a new generation of historians has questioned this view of Castile as a passive liege and of the Habsburg monarchy as a malevolent monolith impossible to resist.

This revisionist effort has resulted in a more complex picture of political life in the Spanish monarchy, emphasizing, for example, the vitality of representative institutions, *cabildos* and *Cortes* (Helen Nader, I. A. A. Thompson, Charles Jago, Pablo Fernández Albaladejo); the persistence of a contractualist political discourse in all kingdoms (James Casey, Xavier Gil Pujol, Fernando J. Bouza); and the continuous efforts of the most important central institutions, the councils, to limit the power of the king and abort some of Philip IV's and Olivares's policies (Bartolomé Clavero, Antonio M. Hespanha, Juan E. Gelabert).

Ruth Mackay's book *The Limits of Royal Authority* should be included among these revisionist works. Mackay has put together a very interesting study that addresses some of the most important historical and historiographical themes arising from the situation of Castile and the Spanish monarchy during the central decades of the seventeenth century. Her main topics are the Spanish Crown's attempts to raise an army in Castile, the "resistance" of many Castilians to conscription, and the support they obtained from local and provincial institutions, the nobility, and some of the councils. It is important to emphasize that Mackay is analyzing not what Michel de Certeau calls "clandestine forms of resistance" (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988], p. xiv) but how and to what effect Castilian subjects and institutions used the judicial and constitutional safeguards at their disposal. In other words, Mackay is interested in how the system worked, what the possibilities of "legal opposition" to royal policies were, and what these practices of resistance tell us about the nature of the early modern Spanish political system.

Those who are familiar with new historiographical approaches in the study of early modern Spain will realize that Mackay's findings confirm what other historians have stressed: the seventeenth-century Spanish monarchy was the best example of what Samuel Pufendorf defined in 1673 as an "irregular form of government [*respublica irregularis*]." According to Pufendorf, this was a state in which "we do not find that unity which is the essence of a state completely established, not because of a disease or fault in the administration of the country, but because the irregularity of its form has been as it were legitimated by public law or custom" (*On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law*, ed. James Tully, trans. Michael Silverthorne [1673; Cambridge, 1991], p. 144). In the Spanish case, this form of government gave individuals and institutions very specific rights: to contradict and challenge royal policies; to appeal to the judicial courts; and, in special circumstances, to resist violently rulers perceived to be "tyrants." Mackay's study clearly demonstrates that the constitutional, jurisdictional, and discursive foundations of this *respublica irregularis* gave the Castilian nobility, its parliament, and the central councils authority to oppose the policies of the Spanish Crown. Even more important, the culture and practice of opposition were shared by local institutions and individuals from the lower echelons of society, who had at their disposal many weapons with which to resist the king and his ministers. As Mackay herself writes, "To some degree the self-assured actors in this study made and shaped and set the limits to absolutism." Even if they did not win all battles, "along the way they made it unequivocally clear that they were vassals whose loyalty was not unconditional, that their duty was derived from a pact, and that such a pact ennobled them all" (pp. 176–77).

One theme, however, deserves further commentary: the conditions and circumstances that made different kingdoms behave differently when confronted by similar governmental policies. If we accept Mackay's interpretation of why Castile did not rebel against the monarchy the way other kingdoms did—"because of the non-absolute nature of royal authority, [Castilians] were not compelled to resist in a manner that would

threaten the structures of civil society” (p. 3)—we would be forced to conclude that in Castile the system was less authoritarian than in other kingdoms and that other, less-privileged subjects were pressured to use violence to defend their rights. We know, however, that this was not the case in seventeenth-century Spain. As many works have demonstrated, non-Castilian subjects and kingdoms were also allowed to petition the king, appeal for justice, deny men and money to the king, avoid being drafted, and refuse the implementation of royal orders and policies perceived as contrary to their kingdoms’ constitutions.

Given these similarities, the different response of the various kingdoms to the Spanish Crown’s policies had to do with the behavior and political attitudes of their elites and with the special circumstances and history of each of the kingdoms. What made it possible “for resistance to be manifested not as open revolt” (p. 99) in Castile was that its elites would have had more to lose than the elites in other kingdoms if the Spanish monarchy had collapsed. Additionally, thanks to the importance of Castile to the Spanish Crown, its elites were able to force Philip IV to negotiate the elimination of “absolutist” policies and the dismissal of Olivares before legal and institutional clashes developed into open rebellion. In Catalonia and Portugal the final explosion came before the fall of Olivares, and it did so because in both of these kingdoms important factions of the elites viewed Philip IV’s and Olivares’s policies as illegitimate and unconstitutional; these factions believed that only violent rebellion would enable them to end the crushing of their liberties and distinctive constitutions by a monarchy they increasingly viewed as “Castilian.”

It is by studying these and other wider contexts, in addition to the themes Mackay analyzes, that we will be able to understand fully the different responses of the various Spanish kingdoms—in particular, why political disagreements in Portugal and Catalonia led to open rebellion while what ensued from political conflict in Castile was not the establishment of an “absolutist monarchy” or a violent destruction of its links to the Spanish Crown but, rather, the validation of a *respublica irregularis*.

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The Reformation of Community: Social Welfare and Calvinist Charity in

Holland, 1572–1620. By *Charles H. Parker*. Cambridge Studies in Early Modern History. Edited by *Sir John Elliott* et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xv + 221. \$59.95.

This valuable book discusses the arrangements made for poor relief in the six most important cities of the province of Holland during the period 1572–1620. The first comparative study of urban charitable agencies in Calvinist Holland, it not only illuminates the impact of the Calvinist Reformation on municipal charity in the Low Countries but helps our understanding of changing European attitudes to community, social policy, and deviance during the early modern age.

The book’s broad perspective, which will engage both specialists of Dutch history and outsiders, is evident from the opening chapters, in which Charles Parker reviews the ongoing historiographical debate regarding the effects of confessionalization, centralization, and commercial capitalism in the larger nation states of Western Europe, the combined influences of which are usually said to have resulted in more powerful measures of social discipline and, ultimately, a more “secular,” public concept of as-