

OPENING

Of Nature and Other Demons

*And so, once idolatry was rooted out of the best and noblest part of the world, the devil retired to the most remote places and reigned in that other part of the world, which, although it is very inferior in nobility, is not so in size and breadth.*¹

José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*

PROOF

In 1572, the Jesuit father José de Acosta arrived at the port city of Lima in the Viceroyalty of Peru. Tasked with traveling inland to meet the viceroy Francisco Álvarez de Toledo—who was on a tour of the colony after the suppression of the Tupac Amaru uprising a few months earlier—Acosta and about a dozen fellow Jesuits crossed the province of Huarochirí, making their way through the Pariacaca mountain range to the east of Lima. Reaching upward of 4,000 feet in altitude, Acosta wrote how, “after all my preparations, when I climbed the Staircases, as they are called, the highest part of the range, almost in an instant I felt such mortal anguish that I thought I would have to throw myself off the mount onto the ground.”² He would go on to describe in excruciating detail how for almost 2,000 miles he and his companions suffered from the effects of common altitude sickness. Despite levels of anguish that seemed to push their bodies to the brink of death, the small cadre of travelers would soon feel normal, leading Acosta to conclude that: “the illness of the Indies of which I speak . . . stirs up the inner organs, and, what is even more remarkable, it happens even when there is pleasant sunshine and warmth in the same spot . . . that the harm is due to the quality of air that a person breathes, because it is very keen and sharp, and its cold is not so much perceptible by the senses

as it is penetrating.”³ Much the same can be said about the rest of his time in the Americas.

Although he was there to aid in the establishment of new Jesuit colleges, what Acosta encountered in Peru was a world the likes of which no other European chronicler or armchair philosopher had ever before seen. The experience was of such transformative power that the resulting book, his magnum opus the *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, bolstered Acosta’s prestige across the Spanish Empire as a learned man and commentator of the New World. Yet despite a notable background in humanist philosophy, Acosta’s observations were permeated by a fear of the demonic that cast a shadow over all his empirical judgments. Indeed, much of what he notes about Peru’s Indian inhabitants is concerned with deciphering how the Devil himself, “retired to the most remote places . . . in that other part of the world,” so ably captured the devotion of indigenous peoples, “[subjecting] them to things of no importance, many of which were very vile.”⁴

To that end there are many devils in this book. Chief among them is the challenge posed to political theorists to take seriously the intellectual contributions of early modern Spanish and Spanish American thinkers in their efforts to make sense of nature and other demons at the dawn of modernity. More the result of omission than commission, misleading narratives about Latin America produced by members of the early modern canon still retain a hold over the ways political concepts, debates, and exemplary names of the sixteenth century are defined. As someone highly indebted to that same corpus, I have written this book to broaden its horizons and rethink its political contours. Like countless postcolonial thinkers, I endeavor here to convey how historical domination is not only composed of epic conquests, but is also reproduced (even if inadvertently) via scholarly work. Specifically, the kind of inquiries I document here lie at the very heart of debates between the empirical and theoretical foundations of early modern political thought. That they happened at the other side of the known world, at a time when Europeans were only beginning to contemplate the existence of literally unknown utopian spaces, is a key part of the story.

Using Spain’s politics of natural history in the New World as my central object of analysis, this book argues that the study of nature in the New World was about the cultivation of wonder, more so than merely extractive, utilitarian interests. My aim is to show how the natural historical writings of chroniclers, explorers, and, most notably, missionaries helped to lay out a distinct set of empirical foundations for modern political thought, as these developed in the

New World. Natural history, I maintain, was a contentious field of narrative inquiry, and should be read today as a distinct genre of early modern political thinking.

The question of genre in the history of political thought has served to establish important boundaries around what political theorists do in their craft. As James Farr remarks, genre often serves as “an ideal-type, admitting of exceptions and differences,” that helps narrate the history of ideas as a lineup: “a linked chain of influence and attention . . . bound together as a tradition, engaged in a great dialogue, each later thinker speaking to or about each previous one.”⁵ To think of natural history as a genre of political thought, then, is to present for political philosophers the interfaces between politics, science, and faith as they developed in the early Spanish Empire. Natural history here serves as a vital link in demonstrating the empirical texture of moral wonder across the sixteenth century, both in the Americas and Europe.

Although the many implications of the European encounter with America have been increasingly documented, missing still is a closer look at how the natural environments of the New World fed into the broader intellectual transformations taking place across Spanish America. Though these objectives are not unwelcome within the field of Political Theory, there remains some reluctance to rethink the established lineup. The reasons for this, in my view, are sociological and ideological. For one, the academic division of labor under which today’s political theorists are trained has changed dramatically in the last two decades. Indeed, the cultures I take up in this text have garnered greater attention in recent years, particularly as the notions of rationalism, rights, and secularity that today’s political theorists predominantly wrestle with were only being sown in the Old World at the time of its encounter with the New.

The clear-eyed confidence articulated by Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, among others, was allegedly still a few centuries behind in the Americas, where the natural and supernatural coexisted (and arguably still do) along multiple registers.⁶ And while the contemporary makeup of interdisciplinary scholarship has made it easier to take up a project that bridges literatures in Colonial Spanish American history, religious studies, and the history of science, with the developing program of the political theory of empire, the influence of a Great Books tradition remains strong. Is this work really political theory? Or is it Latin American Studies? The verdicts seem everywhere and nowhere, particularly as the burden of proof lies in demonstrating that political thinking on the margins of the European metropole can and *does* take place, positioned such as it is against an established canon. My point is not to

complain (or obfuscate), but rather situate the present text and the challenges raised therein. Vital for me is the question of whether the historical study of political theory can accommodate a broader conception of modernity than what it currently espouses. And if it cannot, at what cost?

Ideologically, there is a more salient issue to unpack. As Quentin Skinner long ago warned, “If we want a history of philosophy written in a genuinely historical spirit, we need to make it one of our principal tasks to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts as enable us to make sense of what their authors were doing in writing them.”⁷ To tell the story of the revival of natural history during Imperial Spain’s conquest of the New World therefore requires some attention to who its most notable practitioners were. As they happened to be primarily men of the cloth, additional difficulties emerge given their analytic vocabularies and evangelizing motives. More akin to eccentrics than savants, these chroniclers, missionaries, and scientists nonetheless often risked life, limb, and reputation to defend an emerging style of inquiry that was ethnographic and empirical in scope, as much as it was exegetical and demonological in character. Indeed, making sense of their politics demands reconciling how natural landscapes and indigenous people alike possessed unnatural powers and yet were also coveted as subjects of a distant crown.⁸

To think with demons, then, rather than against them, can say much about the way in which the most notable and dynamic explorers of the New World wrestled with their various intellectual commitments. As Stuart Clark has argued, belief in the workings of demons, witches, and other occult, unnatural characters was an essential ingredient of modern intellectual history for nearly 300 years. “In effect,” he writes, “demonology was a composite subject consisting of discussions about the workings of nature, the processes of history, the maintenance of religious purity, and the nature of political authority and order. Inevitably, its authors took up particular intellectual positions in relation to these four major topics of early modern thought. Quite simply, their views . . . depended on concepts and arguments drawn from the scientific, historical, religious, and political debates of their time.”⁹ Moreover, accounting for the demonological discourses operating in the New World also addresses the reluctance to think of works by Spanish naturalists as canonical to the history of ideas.

As these thinkers developed a vocabulary to speak about what they saw, both among themselves and among various audiences, so, too, did the concept of New World nature emerge. Though the Americas have always held

a special place in the modern imagination, much of the fantastic world that was first shared with eager audiences on the European continent remains alien to many of us today.¹⁰ What did early travelers find that lay beyond their dreams? How were these fantasies shared as desirable realities? What did imperial ambition first look like in the face of great moral and environmental challenges?¹¹

My approach in this book is to address that interplay between empire, faith, and the experience of New World environments, illustrating how different conceptions of nature shaped Imperial Spain's early efforts to cultivate a New World civilization. To do so, I focus on works attending to the distinctive ecological character of the Americas, lending greater attention to how early naturalist writings shaped the intellectual context of Spain's New World Empire, particularly its millenarian ethos. By extension, I also demonstrate how spiritual wonder played a central role in making sense of the New World's exotic landscapes and peoples. Tracing the influence of religious conviction on the study of natural history in the New World, my aim is to broaden the evidentiary basis for rooting the Scientific Revolution in matters of faith as much as politics. Moving through two themes only cursorily engaged in by political theorists—the history of conquest narratives and missionary nature writing—I seek to unravel a long-demonstrated, but tenacious, historiographical prejudice that portrays the Spanish Empire as a largely marginal feature of modernity.¹²

While political theorists such as Diego von Vacano and Juliet Hooker have recently sought to engage accounts of the early Spanish Conquest of the New World in innovative ways, their analyses border on offering a one-dimensional portrait of Spanish domination's role in the formation of racial hierarchy and exclusion.¹³ Alternatively, scholars in Imperial Studies, such as Orlando Ben-tancor and James Fuerst, have turned their attention toward more eclectic explorations of the continuities and ruptures between Spanish metropole thinkers and colonial practices.¹⁴ By their accounts, agents of Imperial Spain are problematic figures, but they are also intimately wrapped up in the creation of something distinctly new. Hence if political theorists are to gain greater insight into the logics of domination that inform early modern vocabularies, they need a more nuanced glimpse of the imperial imagination and its intellectual formation.

In light of these historiographical advances, this is the first work of political theory that accounts for New World exploration and evangelization as a dual science of domination.¹⁵ Rather than portraying imperialism as a project

forged from abroad, I offer instead a more complex genesis of the imperial ideals proffered by the study of nature within the Americas.

Natural history's deployment led to enduring literary motifs in the representation of New World nature, as well as contentious depictions of a future colonial society. The case of Spanish natural history is thus a critical juncture in the relationship between science and empire: driven by religious wonder, scientific inquiry thrived; yet as the empire grew unwieldy, the normative aspirations of naturalist thought were subsumed to instrumentalist economic growth. Spanish experiences of nature in the early modern period helped shape spiritual visions of the natural world, offered an adaptive discourse for empire, and called for a new map on which the future of civilization could be written. This vital period remains today a disputed space from which to convey the imperial politics of science, particularly as contemporary forms of environmental ethics rediscover indigenous ways of relating to nature that reject romanticism and capitalist cooptation.¹⁶

No doubt the history of Spain's "natural encounter" holds valuable lessons for theorists, historians, geographers, and conservationists of nature alike. Indeed, the conditions under which Imperial Spain's power evolved generated long-enduring themes within Enlightenment thought. Of particular salience was the proposition that humans could reconnect with their natural selves, if only they looked to the indigenous past.¹⁷ Today, as greater environmental challenges emerge from the unintended consequences of anthropogenic climate change, a curious revival of that past is developing in popular culture. At stake in media and political narratives alike is a radical, and almost paradoxical, ultimatum for the future of civilization: climate salvation, or, a slow decline into self-induced extinction.¹⁸

Similarly caught between the extremes of global deliverance or destruction, the story of the Imperial Spain's first century in the New World highlights the moral complexity of domination in the face of cultural and ecological incommensurability. While reliving these early moments may not solve the ongoing climate crisis, the natural histories I engage can give theorists of nature and the public alike a renewed sense of the different ways of thinking that made nature into a source of contemplation. More than this, it is my contention that the urgent times we currently inhabit are in need of stories that serve as springboards both to action *and* reflection. Long ago, natural history helped launch a cultural wave of discovery and invention, albeit one that was analogous to conquest. Though I do not know the extent to which our present crisis remains linked to those stories, this book shows how their restoration is a timely effort.