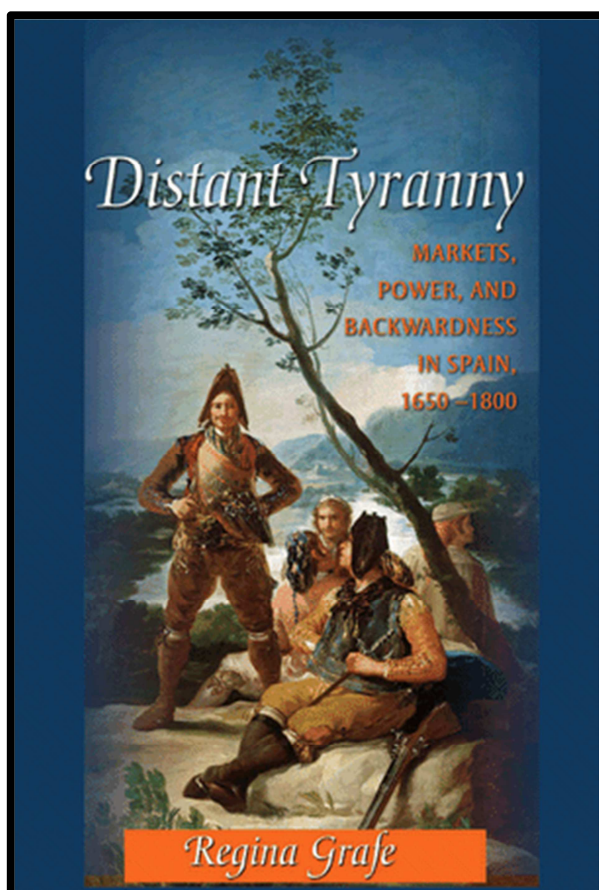


Regina Grafe. *Distant Tyranny. Markets, Power, and Backwardness in Spain, 1650-1800*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012. xvii + 281 pp. ISBN 9781400840533

Reviewed by Arturo Giráldez
University of the Pacific (Stockton)



From the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries in Europe, nation-states and fully integrated markets were parallel processes. Consequently Regina Grafe asks the question “that set off institutional economics once upon a time.” This is the intellectual template of *Distant Tyranny*: Why did some European states become stronger, autonomous units, how are integrated domestic markets connected to such processes, and why in other states, such as the case of Spain, were the processes of state building and market integration “slow and intermittent”? (xv).

Analysis of market integration relies on commodity prices and Grafe’s follows traditional practices; what is highly innovative is her use of cod fish prices –the new transatlantic commodity turned staple food in the seventeenth century. To answer her research question, Grafe follows a quite

unusual methodology in economic history. To buttress her line of reasoning, she studies, with careful attention to detail, a number of themes interconnected with the economic and political life of Spain using, in a masterful way, archival sources, published tracts on the economy, books on politics and intellectual debates, and literary sources with an unfailing eye for the essential detail.

Grafe uses all of these sources, in addition to her vast knowledge of local and regional historiographies. Microeconomic techniques are deployed opportunely with detailed explanations for researchers but without breaking the textual narrative. A masterpiece of methodology, the book is divided in eight chapters according to the topics covered: Markets and states; the relationship between the Atlantic economy and

the consumption of codfish in Spain; transportation and markets; the diverse legal regimes of what Grafe calls “Historic territories” in relation with the state and markets; the power of cities and governance in Early Modern Spain; and the tension between the center and the peripheries.

Cod fish or *bacalao* fishing and trade belong to the Atlantic economy: “These were transoceanic in origin; but they also transformed in their course the domestic economies and societies of Europe” (52), and they provided Spaniards with a comparatively cheap source of protein. Grafe proves that the difficult relief of Spain does not account for the diversity of prices and consequently the poor market integration. Historical kingdoms, with their diverse legal regimes, affected integration negatively, but it was not only these territories. Cities were responsible in great measure for the market’s nature, but why? The answer was the costs of the past empire. Seville, Madrid, Valladolid, etc. shouldered a “mountain of debt [...] taken on in the second half of the seventeenth century on behalf of the Crown” (77). Regina Grafe’s multifaceted and careful analysis casts a powerful new light over scholarly debates, economic assumptions, and political controversies. *Distant Tyranny* is absolutely a must-read for scholars of European economic and political history and unavoidable for scholars interested in the history of Spain.