



TMSR

The Mediterranean Seminar Review

www.mediterraneanseminar.org

Review Editor: Andrew Devereux (History: University of California San Diego)

Editorial Assistant: Aaron Stamper (History: Princeton University)

Dangler, Jean. *Edging toward Iberia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781487501235. 170 pages. Hardcover and eBook \$70.00.

Reviewed by: Yuen-Gen Liang, Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan (ygliang@mail.ihp.sinica.edu.tw)

Date posted: 05 July 2021

In *Edging toward Iberia*, Jean Dangler strongly argues for a place at the table for network theory and World-Systems Analysis in conceptualizing medieval (or “non-modern,” according to her usage) Iberian history. The author’s approach to network theory draws, in modified form, from the sociologist Manuel Castells’ opus. The three attributes of networks she highlights are first, an emphasis on horizontal over vertical relations; second, information flows in “non-substantial dimension” as another type of network; and third, a consideration of political formations as flexible “spheres of influence” rather than rigid delineations of boundaries. While network theory receives substantial attention, World-Systems Analysis (WSA) gets briefer treatment in the book. Dangler writes of systems analysis based on “two core principles, that communities (or societies) do not exist in isolation, and that ‘societal trends follow cycles or patterns’” (43). From these notions have followed the idea of a world organized into cores and peripheries and the patterns of unequal economic flows and power dynamics that structured relations between them. These are the conceptual frameworks through which Dangler seeks to view and understand medieval Iberian history.

Network theory and WSA are laid out in Part One of the book, which constitutes a useful point of entry to these conceptual frameworks. Part Two seeks to link these methods of analysis to three subjects: trade, travel, and “socio-economic conditions” (namely feudalism, slavery, and poverty) in the medieval Iberian world. Part Three continues to apply network analysis and WSA to two additional topics: politics and identity/culture. Among the five subjects, the author makes full use of WSA as a model in the chapter on trade where it plays a role re-affirming al-Andalus as a center of commerce, one with ties to various “nodes” such as port cities and communities in northern and sub-Saharan Africa as well as the eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Broader notions of network theory, on the other hand, is the framework that does the heavy analytical lifting in much of the book.

Of the five subjects outlined above, Dangler’s pairing of network theory with Part Three’s chapter on politics perhaps highlights the potential of her approach most effectively. Indeed, the reality of modern boundary-defined nation-states has been projected onto medieval spaces. In this conception, boundary lines define a space where a ruler’s power is supposed to suffuse in a homogeneous and consistent manner. Furthermore, historical narratives grant the state, invoked by its name, the agency to make decisions and commit acts, when in fact these are the result of complex interplays of relations, interests, and contingencies. Dangler calls for seeing political communities as sets of fluctuating relations, including networks among elites but also a variety kinship, communal, and affinity ties that were more horizontal in nature. Rather

than primacy over territory, struggles for power should be located in matters of jurisdiction, in the case of Christian societies, and in affairs of law, in the experience of Islamic ones. In both, control over the organization and conduct of social relations was prioritized over territoriality until at least the thirteenth century, when fixation on land became more pronounced particularly in Christian Iberia. The emphasis that Dangler places on the relevance of network theory for conceptualizing what had been thought of as territorially-defined communities is a welcome intervention. Indeed, focus on familial, administrative, and commercial networks that often played mediating roles between authority and community has already become a method with which to follow the course and contours of Iberian imperial development in the early modern period. Likewise, it is helpful to think about how networks might reshape concepts of community in Iberia in the Middle Ages, and the continuities and changes that networks underwent in a more expansive “non-modern” period of Iberian world history.

The application of network theory onto the four other subjects varies more in its effectiveness. Trade and travel in the medieval Iberian-Islamic world are topics that have lent well to network analysis in the past. The application of network theory to social-economic conditions and concepts such as feudalism, slavery, and poverty as well as to culture and identity could also make a novel contribution. In chapters that are 10-15 pages long, however, additional exposition that closely analyzes and explains the network mechanisms in each case could help Dangler advance her agenda. For example, an exploration of how the exchange of goods actually built the human relationships that in turn brought geographic locations into intercourse could better illustrate the network properties of trade and port towns as nodes. In another case, how groups identified by the author as “Asturian, Castilian, Aragonese, Mozarab, *mudéjar*, *converso*, and *morisco*,” formed and also functioned as nodes requires careful unpacking, especially given the fluidity and diffusion of identities and communities. These are two among a number of other questions that could benefit from further investigation.

Throughout this synthetic book, Dangler positions network theory and WSA in pointed contrast to reductionist approaches that once had been more pronounced in the study of medieval Iberia. These include isolating the peninsular world from a broader geographic context; delimiting a vast but vaguely-defined medieval period between the splendors of antiquity and the progress of modernity; fixating on monolithic and teleological explanatory narratives such as the “Reconquest;” and essentializing “Christian” and “Muslim” identities and relations. Such dynamics which, as the author further notes, project modern ideological preoccupations onto the past, are hazards to scholars of the field. Mediterranean studies practitioners have been aware of these past tendencies and in response have developed oftentimes cutting-edge research that seeks to remedy the approaches’ shortcomings and find ways to move beyond them. Dangler clearly aims to make this her goal, and parts of her book draw considerably from the ground-breaking studies of Thomas Glick and Olivia Remie Constable to do so. At the same time, it is unclear how equally important work by Brian Catlos, David Nirenberg, and others fits into the scholarly landscape she paints, as they are left unmentioned in the Works Cited. Nonetheless, what the author accomplishes in this short book is to renew our attention to network theory and WSA, bring a number of expert voices into lively conversation, and propose new ways to narrate established historiographic subjects as stories about networks. These pursuits deserve to be highlighted and advanced further.



TMSR

The Mediterranean Seminar Review

www.mediterraneanseminar.org

Review Editor: Andrew Devereux (History: University of California San Diego)

Editorial Assistant: Aaron Stamper (History: Princeton University)

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements: vii

Introduction: 3

Part One: Fundamental Problems; Models and Methods: 21

Chapter 1: Periodization and Geography: 23

Chapter 2: Network Theory and World-Systems Analysis: 34

Part Two: Application of Methodology: Trade, Travel, and Socio-economic Conditions: 51

Chapter 3: The Islamicate Trade Network: 53

Chapter 4: Non-modern Iberian Travel and the Islamicate Travel Network: 69

Chapter 5: Feudalism, “Slavery,” and Poverty: 78

Part Three: New Themes: Politics; Identity and Culture: 91

Chapter 6: Politics: 93

Chapter 7: Identity and Culture: 104

Epilogue: 115

Notes: 119

Works Cited: 145

Index: 161

Author Response:

Jean Dangler, Tulane University, jdangler@tulane.edu

Response to Yuen-Gen Liang’s review of *Edging toward Iberia*

It is gratifying that Yuen-Gen Liang interprets and responds to my book in ways that correspond to its stated intentions. I wrote *Edging toward Iberia* as a theoretical provocation directed toward colleagues and students in our related historical and literary fields to encourage broader questioning of our conceptual models and research tools, although the book was not intended to be exhaustive in its survey of the various applications of the tenets of networks and systems to different themes. As I indicated on pp. 44-45 and elsewhere in the book, WSA and network theory have been applied to numerous topics in historical and literary studies, including travel and trade, and literary networks of texts composed in different languages. Yet scholars of nonmodern periods such as Olivia Remie Constable rarely identified and theorized the network and system principles, leaving many questions about how they worked, despite the cogency of their application. I wanted to explore what it meant to call something a network or a system because I considered them such apt constructs for conducting research and conceptualizing nonmodern Iberia beyond obsolete models.

Liang points out that this stated agenda would have been strengthened in some cases with more explanation. There is no doubt that several topics demand further investigation and development, such as the network mechanisms involved in the sociopolitical conditions of feudalism, slavery, and poverty, or my suggestion about discrete identities as nodes. These are

excellent recommendations for delving into the application of network principles in greater depth in the future. In addition, I am pleased by Liang's comments on the effectiveness of network tenets, rather than on territorial borders, in reshaping how we think about the notion of nonmodern Iberian community. And finally, it would be enlightening and instructive indeed to consider in the future how the theoretical interventions by scholars such as Brian Catlos and David Nirenberg, as Liang indicates, figure into the conceptual model of the network or system. For instance, thinking about how Catlos's concept of *conveniencia* or Nirenberg's arguments about the simultaneous antagonism toward and acceptance of Jews in late medieval Castile correspond to the network and system frameworks could potentially enhance my book's claims about the usefulness of those paradigms, while also enriching the book's engagement with theoretical models related to nonmodern Iberia. Thank you to Professor Liang and to the journal's editors for their interest in my book, as well as for inviting my response to the review.