

Agata Błoch, *Wolni i zniewoleni: Głosy grup podporządkowanych w historii imperium portugalskiego* [The Voices of Subaltern Groups in the History of the Portuguese Empire], Toruń: Fundacja na rzecz Nauki Polskiej; Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2022, 451 pp.

Agata Błoch's book deserves the unquestionable accolade of being published in the prestigious Foundation for Polish Science series, for at least two reasons. Firstly, the author examines the important and difficult subject of the subalterns; secondly, she does so in a way that combines new orientations with respect for the traditions of historical analysis. Well-versed in the currently prevailing trends, Błoch has decided to follow the path of a 'conservative stance with regard to historical sources'. As she writes in the Introduction, 'I merely wish to enrich the contemporary historiographic narrative on the colonial past with an analysis of the grassroots activity of subaltern groups as a conscious colonial subject in their formal relations with authorities' (p. 21). She has fulfilled this promise by following the path set by Marian Małowist.

An overview of the theoretical perspectives and contemporary practices can be found in Chapter 1, 'Subaltern Groups — Concepts, Theories and Research Orientations'. It is a concise, but well-conceived analysis of concepts that are useful though not dominant. They include, first of all, the findings of subaltern studies by Ranajit Guha and his circle, with corrections by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and their Latin American continuators. Błoch regards their theoretical achievements as a framework for the study of peripheral societies in the Portuguese empire, a guideline for research but not a matrix to be replicated. Hence the importance of Chapter 2, 'Research Orientations Towards Subaltern Groups in the Portuguese Colonial Empire'. This is not a classic overview of research, but rather a much-needed introduction to an issue that has been virtually absent from the Polish scholarly literature. Błoch treats this fragment as an introduction to the perspective of subaltern groups. She expands on this intention in Chapter 3, 'The Mosaic of Colonial Society'. This is a comprehensive introduction to an issue fundamental to the Portuguese multicontinental monarchy, namely diversity — and multiple diversity at that, not just one based on skin colour or origin. The author notes that individuals suffered discrimination on many levels simultaneously. In her view, the identity of the excluded was dynamic and changed as a result of cross-cultural contacts. 'Exiting the subaltern zone was possible, provided one accepted the rules imposed by the Portuguese colonizers' (p. 157). This is what gave the subalterns the opportunity to speak, to be 'heard'. This point forms the basis for further reasoning, in which Błoch presents cases of the 'others' speaking. Her argument leads towards the thesis that 'Portuguese colonialism — to a certain extent — brought different individuals together, and did not just exclude' (p. 18).

Chapter 4, 'Voices from the Periphery: The Role of Subaltern Groups in the Construction of the Portuguese Colonial Empire' (pp. 159–266) is the basis of the study. In it, the author makes use of correspondence, extracted from

Portuguese and Brazilian archives and libraries, addressed by the subalterns to the ruler, primarily on matters relating to their status. In this and the following chapter, 'Could the Subaltern Speak' (pp. 267–339), the author uses the method of correspondence network analysis. In addition, she supports her argument with a graphic presentation of the correspondence collected in a database, which she took an active part in constructing. The 'Appendix' includes eight graphs depicting various aspects of correspondence addressed to the ruler. These interesting presentations considerably strengthen her arguments.

The author documents in detail her concept of examining the network as a strategy based on deliberate efforts from both sides of the colonial society. Using various examples, she demonstrates how the elements that made up the network influenced and defined each other, creating a process that corresponds to the political strategy adopted. Bloch has succeeded in presenting a convincing vision of a conscious strategy employed by people who made up subaltern groups in the empire. This is thanks to her focus on free and non-free Native American and African societies, excluding religious groups (Jews, Muslims as well as converts, and the Romani and all minorities). Graphs 1 and 2 (discussed initially on pp. 169–71) present the correspondence by specific individuals from both communities addressed to the monarch or his representatives in Lisbon. The author concludes that the individuals in the community may have created a unique consciousness and sense of belonging 'by the inhabitants of the periphery to the colonial empire, from which they derived certain benefits for themselves as well. I think that the subaltern's subjective agency was embedded [...] in a social structure based on an interlinked world [...] and the subaltern consciously constructed their place within these structures' (p. 171).

The author's analysis of petitions from 1706–55 enables her to show not only the multiplicity of cases of communication between the subalterns and the authorities, but also the complexity of the circumstances surrounding efforts to be heard.

In the same zone we also find African male and female slaves, as well as Native American male chiefs, who could 'speak', were listened to, and, in addition, negotiated their place in space, obviously remaining in an asymmetrical relationship with the Portuguese authorities. Thus, despite their shared ethnic or 'racial' characteristics, their possibilities stemmed from their place within the network in which the behaviour of social actors was rooted (p. 338).

The author concludes that colonial society was not just a hierarchical structure based on the dependence of one stratum on another, because in the network format the various elements not only influenced each other, but also co-defined each other.

In her 'Summary' the author explains that the quantitative analyses, so important in her research, did not determine her conclusions. Instead, they helped her to confirm that 'Afro-Latin American and indigenous communities were active

agents building not only their own past, but also the history of South America' (p. 343). Consequently, the positions of both Spivak and the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group have been verified. Bloch also suggests the need for caution in applying post-colonial theories in historical research. Summarizing her reflections, she rightly observes that relations in the Asian part of the Portuguese empire may have been shaped differently. This circumspection in no way detracts from her accomplishments.

The book has been compiled and published with great diligence, with a solid bibliography and indexes, of which the subject index is particularly noteworthy. Agata Bloch's book provides plenty of material for consideration going beyond the subject of the Portuguese empire. It is worth recommending, particularly to researchers studying Polish subaltern relations, not only in the early modern period.

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