


GLOBAL POTOSÍ: INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE, MINING, NEGOTIATION, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

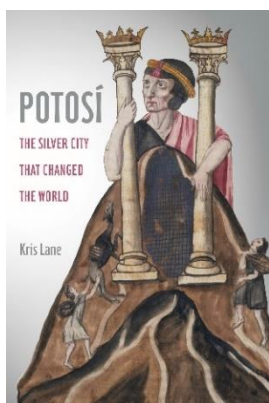
Potosí global: conhecimento indígena, mineração, negociação e ambiente

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In *Potosí: the silver city that changed the world*, Kris Lane (2019) examines the role of Potosí in a global network of trade, which also impacted the community itself, in an exchange of products and culture that shaped colonial Andes. By choosing a city to focus on transnational exchanges, his work adds to the detailed analyses of scholars such as John Tutino (2018), whose book *The Mexican Heartland*, published in the preceding year, discusses New Spain and particular locations in present-day Mexico, without losing sight of the balance between global interconnections and regional patterns. Throughout his piece, Lane emphasizes indigenous contributions to the silver economy and parallel economies. Indigenous skills were crucial for the colonial enterprise, as Spaniards took advantage of local knowledge to establish and expand a major mining hub. Chapters One, Two, and Three are particularly helpful for the audience to understand indigenous structures and practices. At other times, such as in Chapter Five, Lane gives greater attention to non-human events, or environmental developments, namely the impact of smallpox and heavy rain. With eight chapters, the book provides a comprehensive analysis of a colonial town without a parochial tone. Instead, Lane provides evidence of the relevance of Potosí's mining economy, but also of the global relations established within and outside the city's boundaries. This review will provide an overview of above-mentioned chapters, before incorporating scholarly discussions observed in related works, which contextualize Kris Lane's piece within current academic discussions.

The first chapter discusses how mineral extraction in the Andes already occurred for thousands of years before the region's occupation by Europeans, as various natural resources were mined by native populations (gold, silver, copper, among other valuable minerals); in fact, not many deposits remained untouched in Pre-Columbian times (LANE, 2019, p. 22). Lane alludes to evidence suggesting that the silver mines from Potosí may have been transferred by Aymara lords to the Inca, who would have then offered the Cerro Rico to Gonzalo Pizarro at the time of his rebellion towards the Spanish crown (LANE, 2019, p. 24). Although it is likely that mining activities occurred in the area prior to Spanish occupation, Lane contends that the mountain was not intensively mined before 1545 (LANE, 2019, p. 26). Incan presence in the highlands had occurred for approximately one century before the Spanish arrival and, thus, pre-Incan cultures remained strong in the area – namely the Qaraqara and the Charkas, having the latter's name influenced the adoption of the district name “Los Charcas” by the Spaniards (LANE, 2019, p. 27). The large use of metals by the Inca, who produced statuettes and other artifacts which reached further-away areas of present-day Ecuador and Argentina, was known neighboring cultures, leading Pizarro's mission to be aware of a “mysterious golden kingdom” upon its contact with neighboring areas and peoples by 1529 (LANE, 2019, p. 30). In 1532, Antahualpa was made victim of an ambush elaborated by the Spaniards, who then used him as part of a ransom, which eventually led to the sacking of Cuzco's treasures – an impressive number of resources, which funded European enterprises, such as the construction of St. Peter's Basilica (LANE, 2019, p. 30). The political situation in Spain, however, was fragile and with the emergence of a civil war in 1545, Potosí became populated by both loyalists and rebels, with Pizarro being part of the latter until his execution in 1548 amidst the victory of Spanish loyalists (LANE, 2019, p. 31). These considerations in the first chapter indicate how the booming town wouldn't have existed in its known form without the contribution of indigenous communities, whose techniques and skills were pivotal to the local production. The first chapter also indicates how transnational connections were crucial for Potosí before its establishment as a colonial town, given the local inter-American exchanges among indigenous nations.

As in Chapter One, the importance of indigenous knowledge and practices is a crucial focus of Lane's second chapter. Chapter Two counters superficial accounts of Spanish colonialism as a mere "grab and take" process, underscoring, conversely, how the colonizer had to find ways to bring resources to Potosí, as well as to negotiate with local indigenous groups. Lane, for instance, discusses how the production of iron demanded resources that were not readily available in Potosí, favoring an exchange with the metropolis – ironmaking relied on the importation of iron ore, which was abundant in the Basque region, and the Spaniards made it mandatory for Spanish intermediaries to be part of such trade, even if blacksmiths enjoyed autonomy in terms of what they could make (LANE, 2019, pp. 54-55). Lane further stresses the participation of enslaved persons of African origin in the local economy by stating their roles as assistants of some of the blacksmiths (Lane, 2019, p. 55). Copper was also imported from Europe, but it was also found and exploited in the colony – unlike other minerals, there was no Spanish monopoly over its extraction, which was important to produce kitchenware as well as other artifacts (LANE, 2019, p. 55). The growth of side-industries in other towns is exemplified by the textile sector, which was necessary due to the rapid deterioration of clothes worn by workers – such demand by Potosí led to the growth of the sector in places like Quito and Lima, whose further development was made difficult due to the parallel importation of textiles (LANE, 2019, p. 56). Wool would be imported from a range of places in Europe, silk would come from China, whereas other luxury products, such as Venetian glass, appear in records (LANE, 2019, p. 57) – all of which would be transported to the Andes through mule drivers, or *arrieros* (LANE, 2019, p. 57), sometimes assisted by enslaved persons (p. 58). Despite the above-mentioned indigenous participation, the Spanish administration also exercised acts of repression, prohibiting, for example, the consumption of maize beer (*chicha*) by indigenous persons through an ordinance adopted in 1567 (LANE, 2019, p. 58). The Spaniards promoted the consumption of their own beverage – wine – which was imported and, thus, prohibited to indigenous and Black persons in the same year, on the grounds that its popularization was turning the product more expensive (LANE, 2019, p. 59). Given such circumstances, wine began to be produced in South America and brought to Potosí (LANE, 2019, p. 59), whereas other alcoholic products, namely brandy and *aguardiente*, were also produced by 1640 (Lane, 2019, p. 60). Coca, another Andean product, was also common and needed due to the altitudes, being imported from other locations, such as Cuzco (Lane, 2019, p. 61), while tobacco also became popular among the local populations, sometimes coming from distant places, such as present-day Nicaragua (LANE, 2019, p. 63). These characteristics of colonialism emphasize, in their turn, how the colonial process was not uniform, relying on acts of negotiation and repression, often maintaining structures, techniques, and products that existed prior to European domination. The use of coca and the introduction of wine both exemplify transnational flows that shaped the lives of those living in Potosí.

The third chapter of the book further details the role of indigenous knowledge and how reforms brought up by the Spanish crown absorbed those while introducing new technologies to boost mining outputs. During the period of 1572 to 1575, significant measures were taken under Toledo's tenure, which are discussed by Lane throughout the chapter. Under Toledo, the *mita* system became consolidated as much as 16% of the workforce of mines and mills were composed of villagers under such system, all of which couldn't be managed by Spanish officers themselves, who lacked language skills to do it so, favoring the adoption of *kurakas* and *caciques* as intermediaries (LANE, 2019, p. 71). The *kurakas* were Andean regional lords, existent before the Spanish occupation, accountable for obtaining tribute produced by rural families. The production was, thus, concentrated in the family unit. The tribute would, thus, be stored, consumed by the *kurakas* themselves, sent to the Incan lords and exchanged. Such verticality allowed the *kurakas* to control the

movement of goods, being the intermediate traders among villagers across the region. The *mita* system was a system through which young men coming from villages would be required to work in a form of tribute. Although those working under such a system were not enslaved, the poor working conditions they were subject to led to a very precarious labor, which many times proved to be deadly, as reported by different critics of the system, but the practice kept going. When examining such evidence of exploitation, criticism and continuity, Lane traces a parallel with the enslavement of Black persons, stating that “like the enslavement of millions of Africans and their descendants, once put in motion the *mita* labor subsidy became a conscience-killing addiction” (LANE, 2019, p. 75). The example of the appropriation of the *kuraka* and of the *mita* in the colonial enterprise shows us how the Spanish crown relied on indigenous knowledge in order to provide the world with resources extracted from Potosí.

The emphasis on indigenous knowledge and its use by colonizers, observed in the first three chapters of Lane’s work, is aligned with the scholarship on colonial Latin America. Judith Carney’s seminal book *Black Rice* (2001) provided evidence that the cultivation of rice in the Americas has African roots, not only due to the trade of rice in the Early Modern period, but also due to the techniques which are indigenous to Africans. Caroline Pennock (2020), in “Aztecs Abroad? Uncovering the Early Indigenous Atlantic” examines how pre-Columbian navigation skills allowed indigenous peoples to reach distant locations (PENNOCK, 2020, 798). Pennock also alludes to evidence that, with the colonial process, some that indigenous peoples obtained diplomatic posts, sailing jobs, and other official positions, revealing that a considerable number of first peoples were able to transit and travel. John Tutino (2018), in *The Mexican Heartland*, underscores how forms of “symbiotic exploitation” meant that the Spanish crown had to tolerate certain practices in order to manage population expansion and the possibility of uprisings. Tutino gives several examples in his book, among them the role of *gañanes*, daily workers allowed to work on certain plots of land (TUTINO, 2018, p. 108). If indigenous skills were crucial, colonizers also attempted to create technical assemblages in certain contexts. The discussion on the amalgamation of indigenous skills and European techniques (or the intent to do so), present in Lane’s third chapter, has also been part of discussions in the history field. Molly Warsh (2014), in “A Political Ecology in the Early Spanish Caribbean,” for instance, investigates how pearl harvesting techniques that existed prior to European colonialism, were fundamental for the continuation of such extraction under colonial rule. The case studied by Warsh reveals how indigenous diving skills could applied in the Venezuelan coast could, in fact, be more productive than European attempts to mechanize production. These scholarly examples indicate how Kris Lane’s emphasis on indigenous knowledge and on colonial negotiation can also be seen in other academic debates.

Whereas the initial chapters of Lane’s book emphasize indigeneity, agency, and negotiation, Chapter Five takes a different direction. The section discusses the impacts of the 1626 floods in Potosí as well as the *visita* (an inquisitorial inspection) whose scandalous consequences also negatively impacted the community, which, according to the author, took long to recover. The strong rains that year led to the rupture of a dam, sweeping mills, amalgamation refineries crucial for the mining economy, indigenous communities, as well as Spanish constructions (LANE, 2019, p. 123). Here Lane shows the audience how natural events had major impacts on colonial towns, which in their turn impacted supplies and affected the world economy to a certain degree. While in September that year the city found ways to repair, the city was hit by a draught the following year, and by large cases of smallpox in 1628. Environmental issues deeply impacted the community (LANE, 2019, p. 124). These, in their turn, have been the focus of an expanding subfield within history, that of environmental history. Lane’s discussion in Chapter Five dialogues with John McNeill’s (2010) pivotal piece *Mosquito Empires*, which emphasizes the role of mosquitoes and their

pathogens, in developments that took place in the Caribbean. Just as human action had profound effects in colonial and postcolonial societies, so did non-human actors, whose behaviors in the natural world also posed challenges to human subsistence and imperial desires. By bringing an environmental dimension to his work, Kris Lane's book becomes attractive to historians researching topics related to the environment, regardless of their geographical focus, given the transnational character of environmental discussions.

Kris Lane's book *Potosí* provides a detailed account of Potosí's rich history and how it related to global flows and to the development of globalized capitalism. A rich mining town in the Andes underwent a demographic boom, not only exporting mineral resources to other regions of the world, but also importing products and technologies from elsewhere. In such a complex process, the Spanish crown acted with repression and control, but also had to negotiate with indigenous communities. In doing so, it incorporated pre-existing knowledge and techniques. While set in Latin America, the piece speaks to a broader audience, addressing transnational and environmental histories, both of which place Potosí at the global stage.

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