



*From Command to Consent: The Representation and Interpretation of Power in the Late Medieval Eurasian World.* Medieval History Journal, 05.11.2014.

**Reviewed by** Manya Rathore

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 2015)

## **From Command to Consent: The Representation and Interpretation of Power in the Late Medieval Eurasian World**

The first Medieval History Journal Seminar was held at the School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, on 5 November 2014. The Medieval History Journal has established itself as a pioneer in the historical field with its emphasis on multi-disciplinary tangents of the medieval world and a study of medieval history with open chronological and thematic boundaries. Following the tradition of inculcating historical plurality, the first conference of the Medieval History Journal, titled "From Command to Consent: The Representations and Interpretation of Power in the Late Medieval Eurasian World", strived to understand the long debated ideas of political authority and consensus in a comparative framework. The conference was marked by the presence of several scholars of medieval and early modern world history. The geographical variation was a key factor and a point of interest in the discussions, with papers on Europe, India and China reflective of the diversity in political institutions and consensual mechanisms within the authoritative systems. The discussion was twofold, including a historiographical reassessment of the issue and case studies from different regions of Eurasia.

The present editors of the Medieval History Journal, HARBANS MUKHIA (Delhi) and THOMAS ERTL (Vienna) opened the discussion with their keynote speeches. Mukhia examined the multi-layered relations of power in the context of the Indian subcontinent. Citing various examples from the Mughal regime, he called for a reassessment of the notions which equate political authority with

unity and tranquillity. The divine and legitimized notion of the monarchs in Eurasia was emphasized by both speakers. Thomas Ertl presented examples of the representation of centralized power from the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, to Barani of Delhi Sultanate and Abu'l Fazl of the Mughal Empire. A significant discussion on consensual government and shared authority in these regions was also present. Another point of interest was a focus on the historiographical shift from a normative and theoretical understanding of the monarchies to a more pragmatic and functional understanding of the systems. Both speakers opened the questions of authority and consensus to the conference for further discussion.

The first panel, with a focus on European case studies was chaired by RAJAT DATTA (Delhi). NIKOLAS JASPERT (Heidelberg) studied the case of Catalonia and Crown of Aragon as a peculiar example of an extended form of consensus marked by contractual elements. He traced the stages of progress from consensuality to contractualism in 14th century Catalonia. The king's need to reach a contractual consensus with the nobility resulted in the transition to pactism. However, despite the emergence of pactism, the speaker argued that the decision making was still a royal prerogative. The speaker traced the career of contractual rule in Catalonia from oral agreements to documented consensus. Catalonia was presented as a peculiar case in the study of modes of expression and agents of negotiations within the contractual culture and its transformation into laws and forms of

governance. The next speaker, PATRICK LANTSCHNER (Oxford), examined the idea of political consent in the highly complex political landscape of thirteenth century Italian cities. Lantschner discussed the contrast of ideology and practice of consent. In contrast to the earlier speaker's emphasis on written contractual consent, the most interesting contribution from Lantschner was the focus on the withdrawal of consent. Reassessing the concepts of conflict and consent, the speaker argued that there was a place for legitimate withdrawal of consent via the lawyers. However, conflicts and even revolts formed important modes of negotiations of consent in the Italian cities.

The second round of discussion, with a geographical focus on India and China, was chaired by GIJS KRUITZER (Vienna). PANKAJ JHA's (Delhi) paper on 15th century Mithila aimed to reconsider the pre-Mughal or twilight years of the Delhi Sultanate as a period of disintegration of imperial authority. He argued that the existence of universalized territorial claims of the Mughal Empire found favour among its subjects. Popular lore and ideas embedded in two literary texts from Mithila, according to Jha, furthered the cause of the formation of Mughal authority. RANJEETA DUTTA's (Delhi) paper on the early modern Tamil region of the Indian subcontinent focused on dimensions of the borrowing and sharing of authority between the kings and the mathas (monasteries). While the state utilized the social power of the mathas, the latter used the royal support to enhance their incomes. The paper focused on the delicate balance of command and consent between both bodies. As opposed to religious and secular collaboration in the Tamil region of India, there was hardly any religious entity in medieval China. In his paper, ARI DANIEL LEVINE (Athens, GA) stressed the continuity of the bureaucratic gentry under the Ming and Qing regimes, which were far beyond the reach of the state. However, just like the mathas in the Tamil region of the Indian subcontinent, this bureaucratic gentry enlarged its activities in the local sphere. Hence, just below the centralized state apparatus, rule by consensus was carried out by these local elites who remained unaffected by the change of power at the macro-level. Levine called for a change in the present characterization of China as a centralized monarchy, where bureaucrats are defined in the light of royal service. He made a remarkable shift

away from the imperial court to the local gentry. All papers made an argument for an effective dialogue and negotiations on consensus between the state on the one hand and bureaucracy, religious organisations and popular cultures on the other.

The seminar opened new areas of debate on political authority and consensus. Consensus, whether it was in the guise of contracts, popular lore, conflicts or even revolts, emerged to be an integral part of authoritarian regimes. All the speakers, with expertise in their respective geographical areas, questioned and reassessed the power of monarchical and consensual institutions within a comparative framework. Some even encouraged the application of their unique case studies in other parts of the world, opening new visions of historical research in the area. The talks and discussions illustrated the necessity of reviewing the previous historiographical emphasis on absolute monarchical traditions and emperor centred discourse of authority.

#### Conference Overview:

Harbans Mukhia (formerly at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi) / Thomas Ertl (University of Vienna), Introduction

Chair: Rajat Datta (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi)

Nikolas Jaspert (Heidelberg University), Pactism and Consensus in Medieval Catalonia: The Career of a Concept

Patrick Lantschner (University of Oxford), Navigating Legitimacy in a Polycentric Order: The Case of Late Medieval Italian Cities

Chair: Gijs Kruijter (University of Vienna)

Pankaj Jha (University of Delhi), Gathering Idioms of Authority in the Liminal Time-Space: A View from Fifteenth Century Mithila

Ranjeeta Dutta (Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi), Negotiating the Sacred: Power and Authority in the Srivaisnava Monastic Tradition in Early Modern Tamil Region

Ari Daniel Levine (University of Georgia), Southern Song Political Imaginaries

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**Citation:** Manya Rathore. Review of , *From Command to Consent: The Representation and Interpretation of Power in the Late Medieval Eurasian World*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43243>

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