Jeppe Mulich, *In a Sea of Empires: Networks and Crossings in the Revolutionary Caribbean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). 216 pp.

Aske Stick, Uppsala universitet & Gustav Ängeby, Stockholms universitet

How do you make someone else do as you tell them to do? While the question might be posed in a number of circumstances, it probably stood as particularly perplexing for those metropolitan officials trying to assert political authority in the late eighteenth-century Caribbean. Because of its reliance on intermediaries to run colonies and enforce monopolies far away, European overseas colonialism was prone to what in political science and economics is called the principal-agent problem, in which an entrusted agent might defy or deviate from the wishes of the principal if incentivized by personal interest. Jeppe Mulich's (City, University of London) new book offers an innovative take on how developments of this political configuration could be historically studied in praxis, using the Leeward Islands, and thus the Scandinavian colonies, as an example of a 'microregion' where metropolitan policy and national borders carried limited currency well into the nineteenth century.

In a Sea of Empires has the aim of both presenting a theoretical framework for analysing what Mulich calls an 'inter-imperial microregion', defined as a geographical area inhabited by several polities with a particularly high density of interaction across formal borders, and conducting an historical analysis that applies this framework to a region stretching from the Virgin Islands in the north to Dominica in the south, c. 1780-1840. Mulich's framework, developed from an article published in 2013 ('Microregionalism and intercolonial relations: the case of the Danish West Indies, 1730–1830', *Journal of Global History* 8:1 [2013], pp.

72–94), conceptualizes the inter-imperial microregion as an ideal-type centred around a parallel system of authority. The frequent movement of goods, people and information; transference of legal, commercial and political practices; shared internal and external threats; formations of informal communities of groups and individuals; and local intercolonial rivalry all facilitate challenges to top-down governance. Whereas official personnel in the colonies or settlements maintain direct ties to the state and its institutions back home, a system more attuned to regional interests than imperial ambitions exist alongside it. Hence, emphasis is put on the numerous networks and relationships that underpinned regional interdependence between European polities far away, and sometimes channelled informal influence and power.

In addition, a microregion's 'cross-polity interactions', using Mulich's parlance, operates on three distinct levels. First, *interimperial politics*, where treaties and trade agreements, declarations of war and peace, formations of alliances and other formal diplomatic developments influence the region. Second, *intercolonial relations*, describing exchanges regarding political and legal authority on a local level. Third, *transimperial networks*, defined as crossing nominal boundaries of different polities without the same level of institutionalized formality as the other two. The first two types of interactions are thus dependent upon state structures, whereas the latter set of interactions could often subvert or circumvent those structures. As actors should not be understood as limited to a single level, the framework carries the benefit of operationalizing studies on how developments in foreign relations and diplomacy were received 'on the ground', as well as interacted with global historical trends. From a methodological standpoint, the cross-polity approach means that Mulich tries to balance the act of comparing territories of different empires, while not treating a region's colonies as discrete entities. This means taking into account that historical actors, such as Caribbean merchants for example, very much compared themselves in order to exploit profitable loopholes by relocating to another jurisdiction. It is the very entanglement across formal borders between a myriad of imperial intermediates and local actors that is in focus here. The inter-imperial microregion should thus be understood as a *functional* rather than *formal* geographical space.

The proof of such an elaborate framework, however, is in the pudding. Following the introductory chapter, chapter two considers the Leeward Islands from a perspective of political economy and commercial practices. Serving as a foundation for the other chapters, emphasis is placed on political, social, and economic intercolonial networks that drove contacts between island populations and could at times divert the flow of trade when faced with the regulatory attempts of various empires. Chapter three looks at the way the fear of slave uprisings shaped the se-

curity complex of the islands and fostered intercolonial integration. Chapter four examines Caribbean privateering and the specifics of the colonial prize courts system during late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Chapter five explores the legal and social dimensions of slavery as practiced in the region. Chapter six analyses the interimperial political context that saw an abolition of the slave trade, focusing on the Danish and British edicts that banned the trade in 1803 and 1807, respectively.

In the concluding chapter, Mulich highlights two important aspects of the historical analysis on the Leeward Islands. First, a defining conflict between imperial authority and colonial autonomy. Commerce, security, slavery, and legal practice led to frequent clashes between actors with stronger local interests and those with more incentive to align themselves with imperial authorities. Second, the emphasis on the microregion's political configuration draws attention to how the rise of the British Empire affected, and could serve, peripheral powers such as the Scandinavians. At times used as buffer zones between the French and the British, smaller, politically neutral, islands also helped British subjects subvert trading restrictions through free ports, thus aiding British consolidation of power.

With these aspects in mind, Mulich wraps up by revisiting the framework. An important divergence lies in the fact that the half-century examined did see Caribbean imperial actors at times rein in colonial autonomy and solidify its borders, underlining the need for, in analytical terms, a relational approach to the interactions in a microregion. Disparate actors such as metropolitan abolitionists and colonial magistrates could at times find common ground in reining in the planters' prerogative to control local politics. Another divergence lies in the networks of free African and Afro-Caribbean subjects in the Leeward Islands, which emerged from the separation of existing structures by colonial racial hierarchies. This led in turn to the presence of another level in the interimperial microregion, tying together communities with minimum engagement with white colonial society. Before ending with suggestions on where the framework could be applied next, Mulich notes that these divergences point to the framework's possibility to identify what makes a region historically distinctive.

In a Sea of Empires is first and foremost developed on the theoretical level. The historical analysis of the Leeward Islands relies heavily on pre-existing scholarship, and lacks both a stated method and a discussion on how and why the few archival references were selected. One could also have wished for more engagement with the literature on neutral maritime trade rather than smuggling, if not for the sake of the former being easier to empirically verify, as well as the more up-to-date research done on slavery in the Danish West Indies.

There is, however, considerable strength in Mulich's theoretical framework. Drawing on the trend of liminal geography and social network research in Atlantic history, as well as practice analysis in studies of empires, Mulich's focus on the subversion of sovereignty is particularly fruitful when applied to political and legal institutions. In chapter four, for example, records presented from the notoriously corrupt Tortola prize court in the 1790s highlight the mutual relationship between the Danish and British possessions in the Leeward Islands. In a complicated scheme, vessels seized by privateers in waters of the Danish West Indies seem to have been put through a mock case in Tortola, with the purpose of providing the necessary paperwork to avoid seizures elsewhere in the Caribbean. Practices such as this, coupled with the use of free ports, open up for discussion of whether the American historian Holden Furber's pioneer hypothesis—that the assistance rendered by smaller nations helped assert British dominance on the Indian subcontinent—could be applied globally. Moreover, as chapter five points to in its charting of a cross-imperial harmonization of the laws denying subjecthood to slaves, the political space created by intercolonial networks sometimes spurred practices and institutions in forms of governance otherwise associated with the state. This is clearly demonstrated in chapter three, where Tortola, in the face of slave unrest, asked for and received military aid not from the other British possessions, but from the Danish islands, as late as 1831.

Such forms of governance, carried into the nineteenth century with its customary label as the century of the nation state, make one consider how this development influenced state formation back in Europe. If wartime institutions such as free ports and prize courts, coupled with military engagement, affected how states organized and established power, then eighteenth-century war and colonial expansion was an integral part of the small and neutral Scandinavian states. Moreover, there is much potential in the conceptualization of the interimperial microregion as a political entity, and how this served not only as a constraint, but also as a possibility, to carry out imperial authority. Metropolitan officials could count on intercolonial networks to act as security guarantors of their slave-based commodity production, regardless of political upheavals in the 'Age of Revolutions'. Making people do as they were told was often dependent on circumstances rather than strategies, but Mulich's framework can help highlight the relations that facilitated such manoeuvring space.