



La Controversia de Valladolid y los límites morales del poder

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In 1550, in the Castilian city of Valladolid, an extraordinary event took place—one that remains unparalleled in the history of empires. At the height of its power—although not yet in the zenith of its imperial expansion—and as the dominant power of Europe, the Spanish Crown convened a formal theological and philosophical debate to examine a question that reaches the very heart of the imperial government: What right does an empire exercise dominion over other peoples and territories? Its protagonists—Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda—were not marginal figures, but some of the main intellectuals of its time. And what was at stake was not abstract. The result would shape the legal and moral framework that would govern the presence of Spain in America.

The mere existence of what we know today as the Controversy of Valladolid is extraordinary. Here is an empire at the height of its power—militarily dominant, economically expansionary and civilizational confident of itself—which chose not simply to justify its actions a posteriori, but to question publicly and systematically the moral legitimacy of its conduct ex ante. It is difficult to find a comparable moment in the annals of imperial history. Rome did not stop its conquests to question the justice of its dominion. Nor did the British Empire call theological disputes over the rights of colonized peoples at the height of its expansion. Spain, however, did.

It was not an exercise of self-flagellation or a naive renunciation of sovereignty. It was something deeper: the recognition that power, however vast it may be, does not justify itself. That there is a moral order—accessible by reason, theology and natural law—that is above the will of princes. By convening the debate, Emperor Charles V implicitly accepted that even imperial authority must respond to a higher standard.

As both the Debate in Valladolid and the wider intellectual tradition surrounding it reveal, the Spanish Crown did not assume that its capacity for domination automatically translated into moral legitimacy. Even legality did not automatically amount to legitimacy, since the Crown certainly acted within the margins of the law, supported by the legal framework provided by papal authority—especially by the Bulls *Inter caetera* issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 and subsequently reinforced by the so-called *Omnímoda* granted under the pontificate of Adriano VI—which conferred on the Spanish monarchy rights of dominion and evangelization over the newly discovered territories. However, precisely because such legal titles existed, the Spanish scholastics were forced to raise a deeper question: if these titles were sufficient to justify the government in moral and theological terms.

Instead, he subjected his own actions to scrutiny of a pre-existing moral—and therefore legal—order, recognizing that power must be exercised within limits that he does not define for himself. This contrasts sharply with certain contemporary tendencies that equate power and normativity, in which the sovereign is understood as the ultimate source of truth and law, thus eroding his own distinction between law and force. The enduring lesson, therefore, is that the stability and legitimacy of any imperial order does not depend on his ability to impose realities, but upon his willingness to submit to them—especially those rooted in moral principles that no authority, however powerful, can unilaterally redefine.

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At the heart of the Valladolid Debate was a clash between two visions of order. Sepúlveda, using Aristotelian categories, maintained that certain peoples could be considered “slaves by nature”, and that the war against them could be justified if it

led to their civilization. Las Casas, on the contrary, insisted on the full rationality and dignity of the indigenous peoples of America, rejecting coercive conversion and affirming that no empire could claim legitimate authority without the consent of the governed.

The relevant thing here is not who “won” the debate—historians still disagree—but that the debate took place at all, and that it was taken seriously at the highest levels of power. The Spanish imperial project, with all its undoubted contradictions and failures, was modeled singularly by a sustained commitment to moral theology and legal philosophy. Figures such as Francisco de Vitoria and the larger Salamanca School developed a sophisticated conceptual framework for thinking about just war, sovereignty and the rights of peoples—one that would later influence the development of international law.

This tradition did not deny the reality of power. It intended to discipline it. It did not assume that virtue would naturally follow domination; rather, it insisted that prudence (*prudentia*) and justice (*iustitia*) should guide political action, especially in relations between unequal actors. In this sense, the Spanish Empire was not merely a creator of geopolitical realities, but a participant in a moral order that it did not control.

The contrast with the contemporary exercise of power—and the rhetoric surrounding it—in today’s U.S. political discourse is striking. In recent months, the Trump administration’s words and actions have surprised both allies and opponents, suggesting a radically different conception of power. Statements that imply that international norms are subordinated to national—and even more, personal—will, as Donald Trump has expressed, or that legitimacy derives primarily from pure force rather than adherence to pre-existing legal and moral frameworks, point to a model in which the sovereign *de facto* becomes the author of such a framework.

This is not entirely new. Great powers have often acted as if their interests defined the contours of the international order. What is new is the explicitness with which this logic is sometimes articulated. The idea that international law is, in practice, what the most powerful State declares to be, represents a break with the postwar consensus that it sought—even imperfectly—to link even the most powerful actors to a shared legal framework.

The Debate in Valladolid offers an alternative—more demanding and, one might say, more stable—view. It suggests that true sovereignty does not consist in the ability to impose one’s own will without restrictions, but in the ability to govern according to principles that transcend immediate interest. It recognizes that the exercise of power inevitably shapes reality, but insists that that creative capacity must be guided by a previous order of meaning.

It is not a call to moralism detached from political reality, nor to the fabrication of an international idealism lacking a geopolitical foundation. The thinkers of the School of Salamanca were fully aware of the complexities of government, the inevitability of conflict and the limitations of human judgment. Their contribution lies precisely in their refusal to reduce politics, pure idealism and pure realism. They understood that power must be committed to reality—but also that reality is not exhausted in power.

In today’s international system, where emerging multipolarity and renewed competition between great powers are reshaping the global landscape, this intuition is more relevant than ever. The question is not whether powerful states will influence the rules governing international relations—inevitably they will. The question is whether they consider themselves bound by those rules or whether they see themselves as their sole authors.

The Spanish Empire, with all its imperfections, chose—at least at a decisive moment—to stand trial. It recognized that legitimacy cannot be made by force or decree alone. Even the most powerful must ask themselves what right they are acting with.

The lesson of Valladolid speaks directly of the conditions under which power can remain legitimate at any time. The world has always been shaped by empires—whether under a unipolar order or within a more diffuse and multipolar configuration. That reality will hardly disappear. What can—and must—be questioned is the way in which such power is exercised.

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The international system can only sustain the existence of empires if they are conducted according to a moral compass consubstantial to the exercise of power itself. Not as an optional ornament or as an act of generosity, but as a constitutive requirement. Power that is not informed by prudence and justice ends up corroding the same order that it intends to sustain.

This was, in many ways, the original promise of the American project. The political thought that sustained the founding of the United States—articulated in texts such as *The Federalist Papers* and embodied in the Constitution of the United States—did not conceive sovereignty as an unlimited will. On the contrary, it was based on the premise that power should be limited, controlled and oriented toward justice. Just as freedom must always be ordered toward something beyond itself: virtue.

And perhaps even more fundamentally, the U.S. Declaration of Independence states that political authority itself is subordinated to a higher moral law: “We hold these truths as evident: that all men are created equal... endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” Here, legitimacy does not emanate from power, but from conformity with a pre-political moral order.

Even in its emergence as a global power, the United States maintained for a long time—at least in its own self-understanding—that its role was not merely to shape the international order, but to uphold a framework of rules and principles to which it itself was subject. This aspiration was never perfectly realized. No empire has been free from contradiction. But aspiration itself mattered. It provided a standard against which action could be judged, criticized and corrected.

It is precisely this legacy that runs the risk of being eroded when power begins to be conceived as the sole author of legitimacy. If international law becomes indistinguishable from the preferences of the strongest, then it ceases to be right in any meaningful sense. And if political movements define truth and normativity purely in terms of leadership, they abandon the same tradition that once distinguished them.

The present and future administrations in Washington would do well to remember that the strength of the United States has never rested solely on its ability to impose realities or exercise power, but on its willingness—though imperfect—to recognize that it operates within a moral and legal order that it did not create and that it cannot fully control.

The alternative is not greater sovereignty—not even an authentic America First—but its silent dissolution in arbitrariness. And history suggests that empires that fail to recognize boundaries—whether moral or legal—end up losing not only their legitimacy, but also their power. Their right and strength.