Celebratory Remarks on *The Sun King at Sea*

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We have assembled today to celebrate and award a prize to a book that is – in more than one way, and possibly like all truly prize-worthy books – an event.

The book combines detailed readings of a vast archive of largely overlooked paintings and art historical comparisons with sociohistorical microanalysis. It calls upon different types of knowledge – ranging from ship-building manuals and architectural treatises to epidemiological writings and military archives – to work though the fabric of absolutist representation. Its strength lies last but not least in the degree of mastery it has in bringing in these different types of knowledge, the different voices and perspectives, without losing track of its project of illuminating the relationship between the real and the symbolic and their intertwinement.

On the surface we are looking at a book that tells the story of the *forçats*, the forced laborers and at the enslaved *Turcs* and the role they played in Louis XIV and Louis XV navy, itself a crucial part of the absolutist propaganda and therefore of the historic imaginary of absolutism. Turcs and forçats are workers on the galleys, oared, richly decorated vessels praised for their manoeverability and still in use in the Mediterranean to fight pirates as well as for excursions to North Africa. Their prestige dates back to Roman Antiquity, endowing the absolutist Empire with an auratic quality of ancient power. These humans are therefore not merely indispensable laborers in a prestige project of the 17th and early 18th century, they are also figures whose presence in pictorial representations acquire a symbolic importance. Although only a few percent of the forçats were enslaved Muslims – among the workers cleaning up and burying corpses during the 1720 pandemic for example the authors quote 1% – the secret, or rather not so secret center of the book is the Muslim forced laborer. It is his narrative as an enslaved body brought to France from Lybia, Maroco, and especially Turkey, that the book's narrative foregrounds, although he is also in a constant process of becoming invisible and submerging into the crowd of forced laborers, Hugenots, pirats and so on. It is here that the central provocation seems to lay: that although in our common understanding slavery was not a crucial historical reality on the French mainland, it did exist and even more: it was a central figure on the threshold between the real and the imaginary in absolutist France.

In order not to repeat what Hall Bjørnstad and Rebecca Spang have said, let me highlight three implications or aspects of the event of this book that I would like to discuss:

1. My first question is about the relationship between France and Ottoman Empire. From our standpoint today, the relationship between France and the Ottoman Empire is asymmetrical. In other words we perceive France as a colonial power and as part of a European colonial hegemony. When did this view emerge? How does this relationship look from a non-Eurocentric perspective? Could it be that France and the Ottoman Empire are in the 17th and early 18th century rivals and was their relationship from some vantage points more symmetrical in contemporary perceptions on both sides than it seems to us? Did these powers emulate each other in their rivalry?

2. Your book describes a geographic shift from center to periphery both in terms of the historic reality it investigates as well as in the symbolic practices it illuminates. How would you describe this movement from the center to the periphery, especially given that

absolutism is a centering sociopolitical system? Is the periphery revealing something about the center? Is it the place of a suppressed reality? Or is this primarily a analytic choice?

3. What does it mean that representations of the figure of the forçats and of the salve are frequently positive? For example the physician Bertrand's elevation of the Turkish galley slaves to merciful helpers in a text that is likened to Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* and other examples? Are they glimpses of a humanism that characterizes the 18yth century in our eyes? Do these hide or even cover a dark reality or do they highlight a new reality?