

Elizabeth Horodowich

*The Venetian Discovery of America:
Geographic Imagination and Print Culture in the Age of
Encounters*

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The decades between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century saw an unprecedented broadening of Europe's geographical horizons. To summarise the main events, in 1488 Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope, in 1492 Christopher Columbus reached the American continent, and in 1498 Vasco Da Gama set foot in India for the first time. Despite the active role played by the Italian sailors in oceanic navigation and their important contribution to the Age of Encounters, it is undeniable that from a political point of view this was the golden age of the Iberian powers, who were the first to give impetus to European maritime expansion.

The traditional Mediterranean powers, in particular the Italian states, were thus excluded from this first run of expansion. Venice, an ancient hegemonic power in the eastern Mediterranean, was among the political and territorial realities most threatened by the changing balance between European thalassocracies. The strength of the pearl of the Adriatic Sea relied for centuries on its contacts with Byzantium and on the commerce of spices coming from the East, collected by the Venetian galleys in the ports of Alexandria, Palestine and Syria and sold under the shadow of Rialto. The ruling classes of the Venetian Republic, therefore, were unwilling or unable to take a direct part in the expansion driven by the monarchies of Spain and Portugal, embarking on a slow but inexorable political and economic decline.

So far, this is the traditional narrative of the relationship between Venice and the Portuguese-Spanish discoveries, especially the discovery of the New World. However, the story told by Elizabeth Horodowich in *The Venetian Discovery of America* is a different one. The power of the Serenissima during the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century, in fact, was based not only on trade, but also on culture. Venice was in those decades the European capital of printing. As Horodowich states,

the “Venetian press grew to publish between 15,000 and 17,500 editions in the sixteenth century alone. This represented half or more of all the books printed in Cinquecento Italy” (p. 5). The printing press was the way through which Venice and Italy discovered America and took part in the Age of Encounters. This statement is more than metaphorical. Horodowich goes on to affirm that “most travel narratives produced by the Portuguese remained unpublished manuscripts or first appeared in print in Italy, or later, in the Low Countries rather than in Portugal itself. The same can be said for Spain” (p. 5).

Italy, and more particularly Venice, explains the author, thus played an important function of literary mediation between the realities, i.e., politically and militarily leading the creation of commercial and colonial empires in the new worlds, and the urban societies in Europe which did not have access to those distant realities.

Such mediation, Horodowich says, was not neutral, in the sense that it did not merely translate literally Spanish and Portuguese manuscripts about the Americas. Venetian translations and publications hid the deep and implicit mental structures that the Serenissima had developed about the world in the previous centuries of contact with the Middle and Far East. In this sense, even for Venice, it was a true discovery of America.

The point made by Horodowich in her book is important from a methodological point of view, because it helps to understand the mechanisms of invention of the American continent which followed in Europe the physical discovery of that land beyond the ocean. Such historiographical operation follows other remarkable works of historians such as Ricardo Padrón, Michael Householder, and David Quinn. Italy, the author says, remained deeply concerned about Iberian and particularly the Spanish expansion in America, because it reflected the similar Castilian expansion in Italy after 1559. This is why in Venetian sixteenth-century translations of Spanish writings on the American expansion one can find a violent anti-Castilian polemic, especially in prefaces written by Venetian editors and translators.

The structure of the book follows the various ways in which information about the Iberian expansion in the New World reached Venice, and how it questioned Venetians about their own identity. The Venetian ruling and merchant classes, in fact, in 1493 were not deprived of mental categories to understand better than others the meaning of the discovery of a distant land. However, they did not feel the need to define them as new worlds, given the familiarity they had had for centuries with other worlds, equally distant, such as the Asian lands reached by Marco Polo. Certainly, Venice could not imagine that in the near future migratory flows incomparably larger than Polo’s single adventure would be pouring into the Americas. Nonetheless, for a long time in Rialto the protagonist of *Il Milione* would remain associated with Christopher Columbus. Even the city of Tenochtitlan, built on a series of islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco, reminded the Venetians of their city, becoming a real mirror in which to question themselves.

Other figures, Horodowich points out, also made important contributions to the Venetian discovery of America. Among these we find cartographers, geographers, historians, and writers. If the highlight of the writings published in the lagoon city on Iberian expansion into the New World was Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Navigazioni e Viaggi*, a decisive role was played by the cosmographer Andrea Zorzi. His manuscript about the New World was never published but was full of valuable information. Another type of tool of great importance to the European discovery of America were maps. Venetian production also played an important role in this field. One of the most famous cartographers of the sixteenth century was a Venetian, namely Giacomo Gastaldi. He was among the first to represent the American continent as something distinct and separate from Asia. However, this type of representation was mediated, not based on direct experience. What made Gastaldi's charts even more interesting, Horodowich explains, was the influence exerted on them by Ramusio's edition of Marco Polo's *Travels*. All this confirms how much the Venetian discovery of America actually started from a reflection on the Venetian identity itself.

In conclusion, Horodowich's book has the merit of shifting attention to a lesser-known dimension of the discovery of America. Italy, not only in the Renaissance, but until the early 1900s, has been considered a periphery of the great Atlantic imperial powers. This work shows how during the early modern period there were other important ways to discover new worlds, and especially the American continent. The author highlights how every geographical discovery and every encounter with other cultures and civilizations passes through a questioning of one's own identity, values, symbols, and history. In this regard, the Venetian case is particularly exemplary. This book also reminds us how the process of global expansion experienced by early modern Europe did not begin with the Iberian sailings of the fifteenth century. The cultural categories of encounter and exploration had their roots in the commercial contacts to the east of the Italian states, and Venice in particular. It was a unified movement. For these reasons, *The Venetian Discovery of America* represents an important and much-needed work in the history of early modern globalization, representing a new and important historiographic contribution to a constantly evolving field.

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