For Ron Scapp

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Homo Viator
Knowledge of the Earth and Theory of the World in the Age of the first Transatlantic Voyages.[1]

Abstract

Geography has always been linked to knowledge of the territory, and by extension to the seas, in what is basically a physical, indeed geological, sense. It provides an accumulation of data measured on a tridimensional scale, and was of crucial importance especially to the earliest travelers, when transportation was long and difficult and presented untold uncertainties and dangers.

But geography is also human geography, that is, a form of relating to the territory (and the sea) in which the physical and the cultural are not so easily disjoined, and where the politics of place plays a determining role. This paper examines how the travelers (explorers mostly) saw, recorded and reported objects and facts as primary information that was then translated into usable knowledge to be circulated in various communities. As a result, this body of materials needed to be interpreted, taking up the energies of philosophers and statesmen who needed to invent a language, a new map, a world in short that made the earth make sense.

Yet this process also entailed two more aspects that complicate our picture of the understanding of societies in the past. The first is whether during the so-called Renaissance we did have a true paradigm shift in our comprehension of the (Western) world; the second concerns the relationship between the methods of gathering information and their theoretical validity and legitimation, that is to say, their becoming "established knowledge." The thesis submitted is that humanity is, in some deep ontological sense, characterized by the contingent encounters of roaming beings

I.

The question of the relationship between geography and knowledge is an ancient one, and has informed every phase of the development of most civilizations we know. Is geography a "science," a form of knowledge? And is knowledge, epistemology in general, something that needs to be mapped? Linked to something pertaining to the earth in some guise?
Starting from the truism that before we are human beings we are ineradicably biological, indeed physical, auto-mobile entities, in the pages that follow I will keep in the background the general assumption that *material practice comes before theory* (whether of knowledge or of being) and that, moreover, *language is essentially an interpersonal activity* which provides the *co-enabling* substrate for all forms of human understanding. At this particular juncture in our sociohistorical memory we must be aware, and at least accept for the present journey, how the documented shift toward an abstracting, geometric, mathematical and finally logical view of the world has been, all along, a rhetorical one, that is to say, a political and social construct (Carravetta 2013). Which

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doesn't mean it isn't any the less "real." Quite the contrary, discourse is what makes the earth *and* the world, and the journey over, through, and between them, intelligible, tangible, meaningful. I have elsewhere developed a model whereby the methods of the nascent sciences of astronomy, geography, hydrology and what we can collectively call the natural sciences cannot be disjointed from the linguistic practices of the day, that is, from their rhetorical necessity. In *The Elusive Hermes* I have argued that rhetoric and methods are the recto and verso of essentially the same process, as both aim at getting a result of sorts, or reaching an objective; their difference being more one of emphasis and application through specialized codification, than one predicated upon an intrinsic otherness which informed the aforementioned paradigm shift. In the century that precedes Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes, method was an endlessly uncertain accumulation and hypothesizing of facts and figures which would not always square away with inherited theoretical frameworks (derived by and large from either Scripture or the Platonic strain of the Graeco-Roman tradition). I will focus on one paradigmatic sociohistorical example: The inspirer of Amerigo Vespucci and, in part, Christopher Columbus, Arturo Toscanelli, a secular humanist, grossly miscalculated the distance between Portugal and Cipango, but he had finally a vision, not yet a theory in the post-Renaissance sense, but a dim perception that it could be done, that is, reach the East by going West. It was a matter of reversing the direction of traveling, and seek to reach the origin – Orient < Origo, East, where the sun rises – by going the other way – Occident < Occasus, West, where the sun sets.

II.

The period that extends from the 1450s to the 1650s AD has been appropriately called the Age of Discovery. Some have objected to the expression, and in my lifetime some characterized it as the Age of Mercantilism, or the Age of the Rise of Absolute Monarchies, or the Renaissance of classical learning, with zealous post-colonial scholars rebranding it as the birth of Modern Colonialism (some going as far as dubbing it the Age of Genocide). Clearly there are elements of these views in what for practical purposes we will continue to call the Age of Discovery. How could it not be so, as we will see. But I want to stress the discovery part, and not in the naïve sense in which this expression presupposes that some Europeans discovered a "new" or "other" and uninhabited world – after all, for nearly a century before 1492, and even before going back to Alfonso X "El sabio" of Spain (whose *Alfonsine Tables*, Toledo 1252-72, Columbus himself consulted in a 1483 edition), the general consensus was that "we, the European" were going to try to connect with an already existing part of the earth, variously described as Cathay, or Cipango, or India, or in general some other part of Asia. I mean discovery in the realistic sense in which a different or alternative sailing route was hypothesized based on observations, then projected both graphically and conceptually, so that previously unknown routes and destinations started being mapped, with far-reaching epistemological and ideological consequences.

The philosophical question here is: how do we go from the known to the unknown? Answer: by devising new methods. Method comes from Greek *meta-hodos,* going along the way, furrowing a path to go forward. In practical terms: find a new route!

Now let us contextualize: *from the point of view of the Europeans*, these new methods, which entailed advances in geographical and astronomical knowledge, produced objective possibilities for societies (or for some people within those societies) to migrate, as a flux and exchange would occur, and people's lives would need to alter, adapt, rethink who they were, in

short, discover new lands and peoples and in the process re-discover themselves. Taking the word etymologically, a new territory was disclosed to the perception of the seafarers, it was unveiled, unearthed, brought to light, announcing a something/somewhere which, though it may have existed before and independently of the action of discovering, was unknown, ignored for those civilizations we call European. It makes us think of the conundrum of the tree that falls in the forest: if there is no one to see or hear it, did it ever happen? Of course, but like eclipses on Jupiter and supernovas exploding in Alpha Centauri, did they mean anything…for humans on earth? Did these cosmic events impact our knowledge of the earth? And more to our point, did they increase our understanding of the world/s we dwell in? Upon making contact with previously unknown people, Europeans might as well have thought (as some, indeed many, did in fact think!): I traveled over the perilous ocean-sea to these shores and here you are: before I got here, you did not exist! Not a banal question at all – for these people now exist *for* a given observer or group or political entity for the first time. For those who are the masters of Discourse, or the specific producers of the differentiated rhetorics, discovery – Eng.: *Dis/cover*, It.: *s/coprire*, Fr.: *de/couvrir*, Ger.: *ent/decken*),-- enables a two-pronged power relation and a legitimation for that power is established the moment these individuals or groups start talking about it. Or writing about it so that others can apprehend of what lies at the end of the journey, and determine that you and I exist. Except that it is I who attests and validates the fact that you are there, that you are at all. This double process of dis/covering is not ambiguous, is not undecidable, quite the contrary: it allows for Western discourse to say two things at the same time, both effective, meaning-bearing, and real.

III.

In the key decades of Renaissance Humanism –roughly 1440s to the 1510s – geography did not exist as a science in the modern sense. That would take an ever-growing, continually enriched and complicated period of growth starting mainly in the XVII century, followed by the endless navigations and explorations of the XVIII century, and finally with the great codifications by the founders of the National Geographical Societies throughout Europe and the Americas, spurred by the researches and reflections of the likes of Alexander von Humboldt, Carl Ritter, Vidal de la Blache, Friedrich Ratzel and others, the majority of whom were trained and steeped in the also recent disciplines of geology, physical geography, botany, chemistry, evolutionism (Mendoza 36). The growing positivist, spatializing, and ultimately quantitative geography that followed World War II eventually led to the dissolution of the very discipline (Cloke 8-9), which was ultimately removed from academic offerings and bowdlerized in pop culture. A case can be made that environmental studies and ecological preoccupations will need to relaunch the study of geography, but it will be digital, space-age techno-human geography. The mere mortal traveling the surface of the planet has most recently tossed aside maps: Global Positioning Satellites can show us on hand-held devices where we are and where we want to go…

At the peak decades of Renaissance Humanism, the disciplines that commanded the master tropes or, differently worded, the referential paradigms, were, as is well known, theology, cosmology, and jurisprudence. And this must have been an extremely stimulating period, exciting, optimistic to some degree, albeit fraught with social uncertainties, shifting power centers, and endless regional wars. Historians remind us that the printing press was introduced, cannons and explosives start altering military ventures, and navigation makes some subtle but

important gains. This is the age of Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvuan Man," and Pico della Mirandola's "Dignity of Man" manifesto. Less than a generation later, we have Desiderius Erasmus, Thomas More. The first major and truly scientific codification of the knowledge of the earth could not be long in coming, and we may say that it occurs a bit down the line, in 1537 with the Mercator map, while six years later Nicholas Copernicus publishes his *De Revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*). But now let us recall, that though developed already around 1514, Copernicus' ideas met great resistance by established luminaries, themselves still grappling with Aristoteleanism. In effect, he wasn't that revolutionary, for the novelty consisted in retrofitting a Ptolemaic conception of a harmonious universe with new epicycles to account for accumulated observations that expanded on the Alfonsian tables. We should not ignore the power of what was the dominant, pre-existing idea of Harmony at the time, against which anything we may label scientific or pre-scientific had to be matched. It took another sixty years, with Johannes Kepler and then Galileo Galilei, to have the scientific community begin to rethink the entire organization of the physical universe. And formulate a new kind of harmony, a new model for the world. But, how naïve and sweet to think of the history of our civilizations as linear progress, the way a dominant idea of historiography has done until very recently! The problem is, or was, that there is always a Torquemada or, less metaphorically, a cardinal Bellarmino, behind the door waiting to nail the daring discoverer: the cases of Giordano Bruno and Galileo himself ought to be emblematic reminders.

Against this context, the questions remain: How do we decide that the discovery of a new land, implicitly requiring travel, is key to some scientific improvement in our understanding of our world, and what are the consequences of such a decision? How many factors are we allowing to have relevance in our historical assessment, or scientific hypotheses, or theoretical expectations? How much were the actual explorers really responsible for determining what was going to be called a "New World?"

IV.

The amount of geographical/navigation information collected by the 1470s was quite extensive, spearheaded by Henry the Navigator and subsequent Portuguese mariners who within a span of sixty years had located the Azores, the Canaries, the Capo Verde Island, and had reached along the coast of Africa as far down as Gambia. By 1487, Bartholomew Diaz touched the Cape of Good Hope and would have gone beyond had not his crew forced him to turn back. But some definitive knowledge had emerged: Africa had a *finite extension* below the equator. This is a time when natural philosophers were trying to figure out the circumference of the earth, and were attempting to draw the precise location of longitudinal lines upon the globe. This pursuit, which took another three centuries to finalize, was really the Achilles's heel of the seafaring explorers. To determine where they stood and in which direction they were going and for what distance, sea captains had to rely on a primitive sextant (called a theodolite), magnetic North, an hourglass, estimated speed, latitude (measured by charts which pinpointed the sun's declination across the skies at different times of the year), and ultimately on their experience and good seafaring intuition. In a way, the explorers worked at the limit of human intellectual capability, where method was evidently being pieced together under a constantly shifting and still mysterious, or at least unmeasurable, cosmos. Their theoretical framework was not yet anchored on Newtonian celestial mechanics, but on what retrospectively is a confused amalgam of Ptolemaic cosmology deeply embedded into a Judeo-Christian conception of the whole

universe. In Foucaldian terms, this was still a period in which epistemology relied on resemblance, not on representation, on symbols, not on signs. Resemblance bears a direct relationship to the perceiver's inner knowledge (whatever that might be), whereas representation is one step detached, for there is a system of conventional language codes, or notations, inserted in-between which presume a separate, and later called objective, formulation to map out, by analogy, that same universe. It is the deepest paradox of our Modernity that a reliable, reproducible and eventually credible knowledge of our planet and therefore of our world was made possible only as we isolated, over a period of century and a half, its empirical basis and translated it into mathematical coordinates, in order for this knowledge to make sense, to function, ideally, independently of its ideological, religious, and existential parameters. This would have lasting consequences until late Modernity.

The explorers described places, but the information had to be situated within an overall theoretical conception which was still lacking, or had to be the one inherited from the late Middle Ages. Till his death in 1507, Columbus believed he had discovered the outlying archipelagos of either Cipango or Cathay, and to him it was still only a question of further explorations to find the mainland: India! He was only 12,000 miles off the mark…

V.

Not so differently were the beliefs of his childhood friend, co-patriot, and fellow emigré Jacobus Caboto who, however, having had for various reasons to leave Genoa for Milan and Venice, eventually identified himself as a Venetian during his sojourns in Spain and finally England. It is known that when Cabot saw that his plans for a voyage under the sponsorship of either the King of Spain or the King of Portugal were not gaining traction, he opted to go to Bristol and appeal to Henry VII to get permission and support for his journey. He coaxed the support also of the Bristol merchants, among whom figures a Richard Amerike, the main sponsor of the voyage. However, sailing into the unknown is not a good business venture, so he ended up getting only one ship, the *Matthew*, and in order to defray costs had to commit to catch cod, at the time a major staple, on the return trip. Cabot knew of Columbus' first and second voyage, but he felt the way to Cathay was further North, this on the sheer basis of the rotundity of the earth. We should recall here that globes were beginning to circulate precisely at this time, with Berhaim's 1492 globe serving as the model upon which to start etching the new coastlines described after each crossing. He had acquired important knowledge from the direct experience of the Bristol shipwrights who had already, since 1480, landed past Ireland and gone as far North as Iceland and as far West as Greenland, and some believe even Labrador. The much discussed Vinland map of 1440 clearly shows that northern fishing expeditions had touched on landmasses which could be either Greenland or Labrador.

Now Columbus was well aware of Cabot's northern seafaring experience, and trusted his information to be correct because he himself had voyaged not only all around the Mediterranean, and along the Western African coast to the Capo Verde Islands, but also up to Bristol on the Western coast of England, in 1477, reaching the Shetland Islands, and apparently even Iceland. No one then and since has ever questioned the superb navigational skill Columbus had acquired, and the few accidents that occurred in the Caribbean, including the grounding of the Santa Maria, were always caused either by storms or negligent personnel. The point remains whether he secretly used Cabot's greater knowledge of the northern seas and the maps from his British

friends to figure out possible routes across the Mare Oceanum. This was a time, in a way not unlike our own, where *new* information about generally unknown locations is jealously protected, suggesting that the actors in question understood it to be an instrument useful for bargaining purposes, for prestige, and to get a leg up on the competition. For above and beyond what either Columbus or Cabot wished to discover, there is no denying that they both aspired to some sort of recognition and reward -- in Columbus' case the short-lived title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy of the Indies, in Cabot's case a yearly pension that finally lifted him out of poverty and out of reach of creditors from three different countries. Such rewards were possible and much sought after, entailing being conferred various kinds of titles and ultimately legitimacy within the growing middle class. Typically these titles consisted of guaranteed emoluments by a political entity or a commercial enterprise socially and financially above the explorers. This in practice meant the Crowns of Portugal, Spain, and England, and the mercantile interests they dealt with. France and Holland come a few years later.

A case in point is offered by the contention around the famous Alberto Contino map of 1502, drawn on the basis of descriptions made by Juan De La Cosas, who was a major explorer, ship owner of Columbus's "Santa Maria" (the one that was beached on Christmas eve, 1492), and cartographer author of a *mappa mundi* (world map) derived from observations he made during his voyage with Alonso de Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci on the latter's second trans-Atlantic voyage in 1499. The *mappa mundi* is the first map that shows the coast of Southern Florida. This map was obviously treasured by Portuguese authorities, until somehow it was pilfered and used as the model for another famous map, the one by the Genoese Nicolo Caneiro in 1503-05, which by then shows a vague, grossly erroneous, but still recognizable continental Eastern seaboard. (We have to wait until Giovanni da Verrazzano's voyage in 1523-24 to get enough consistent information for a full coastal mapping that extends from Florida to Newfoundland; it was done actually by his brother in 1526-27). Now, historians have asked, given the succession of expeditions in those years, why was Florida "officially" discovered by Ponce De Leon only in 1513, a year after Vespucci's death. Why the delay? Why and when was knowledge of the discovery of the New World made and to whom was it so important? And does this knowledge have implications for the status, fate, understanding of homo viator?

VI.

A recent book by David Boyle, *Toward the Setting Sun* (2008) delves into the intrigues by the competing explorers. Boyle seems to respond to two other works, the first by Rodney Broome, *Terra Incognita* (2001), who makes the point that ultimately America was discovered by the British, i.e.: by an explorer sailing under British flag, who happens to be that same expatriate born Giovanni Caboto of Genoa. Moreover, this was achieved thanks to the patronage of one investor and merchant and later mayor of Bristol named Richard Amerike, after whom Cabot presumably "named" the largest (by now considered "continental") land mass he had described during his 1498 voyage to Nova Scotia. The other major work was by Paolo Emilio Taviani, whose mammut three-volume *Christopher Columbus* (2000), perhaps the most documented of all books on a single explorer we have to date, and for whom Columbus basically could do no evil: it was as partisan and identity-oriented toward the great "Italian genius" as Broome's was keen on foregrounding "British achievement."

Boyle writes of a "race" across the Atlantic by weaving the lives of the three explorers, Columbus, Cabot and Vespucci, since they knew one another well, and are recorded as having been, at one point, together in Seville, between Columbus' 2nd and 3rd voyage, in 1497. But he takes pains to show that their lives and understanding of what they thought was the goal, the geographical-epistemological case -- that is: that by navigating West you get to the East, a thought that presupposes from the start that the world we live in is anchored to the earth as a more or less spherical geological object -- was subject to endless corrections and suppositions and modifications based directly on a constant and by and large imprecise stream of information gathered from other mariners. The problem here is that this information was uniquely understood as not making the cut to universally valid knowledge yet, since science far from being what we think of it today, did not even exist: the paradigm was being shaken, but it had not yet shifted. Indeed not only our three explorers, but other minds at the time, such as Leonardo, understood and were flustered by the realization that there existed no "standard" measurements over a spherical surface, there was no paragon to invoke, not yet even an algebra let alone calculus to provide the conceptual tools which guarantee an absolute reproducible or analogical translatable unit. The only thing they had to work with was the standardized league, and the notched degrees of latitude north/south latitude on a quadrant or sextant. Help came through Vespucci's third voyage when he sailed downward way below the equator, and began to describe and map out the presence of the Southern Cross, stars which, incidentally, were known to the Ancients but because of the recession of the earth (it spins on an axis which wobbles, cutting a cone around the North Star and returning to its original point every 1500 years or so) had disappeared for centuries, becoming thus mythical objects. Nearly two hundred years earlier Dante describes them in *Inferno* 26, when Ulysses had sailed so far leftward from the Columns of Hercules that he got a glimpse of them, before drowning with his ship and his men.

In brief, as noted above, the accepted world-view, the belief system of the period, was by and large still that of Ptolemy nested into a Christian theological centrality of man and earth as images that harked to an elusive God for explanations concerning origin, time, and the very possibility of knowing at all. That is why I said at the beginning that these men were developing methods of traveling and mapping the earth without a theory of the earth, for the earth was still a world, a *mundus*, not a *terra*. To return to Boyle, what we are made aware of, even more so than was possible through the earlier standard summa in the field, Samuel Eliot Morrison's *The European Discovery of America* (1974), is what I call (inspired by developments in other disciplines**),** *the contingency of history*, and what in the end gives us reason to believe that national mythemes about appropriating the "first" discoverer of a continent, as well as being the discoverer of a scientific principle, are simply ideological constructs that have a limited shelf life, explainable though not always justifiable. It corresponds metaphorically to the time one stays put at a particular bivouac before getting on the road. Again.

VII.

Let's consider two examples, both of which are relevant to philosophy and history precisely owing to the impact the journeys had on developments in a number of social contexts. When, in late December, 1495, the Florentine investor Gerardo Berardi relocated in Seville died, his partner and friend Amerigo Vespucci knew he had inherited responsibility for a tremendous debt incurred for Columbus' voyages, and he knew better than to expect he'd be paid back because the news from the Caribbean was that no gold had been found (already some called Columbus

"Admiral of the Mosquitoes"). Vespucci still managed to get four ships equipped for the next major transatlantic fleet, but bad weather nearly destroyed them, forcing the convoy back. Exhausted and depressed, he gave up the post, and terminated his responsibilities as Berardi's executor. Columbus realized by June 1496 that he no longer had his friends to back him up; he himself was already in deep crisis from the disastrous second voyage where he found Isabella destroyed and the crew he had left behind having gone haywire, some killing natives for sport. Columbus realized that he could no longer control who sailed where and when (which was part of his original 1492 contractual demand to be Commander of all future expeditions). He thus appealed to Ferdinand and Isabel once again first to explain why his second voyage was a disaster, and then how he planned to remedy that through a third voyage with a different game plan.

But the royals were busy with a military expedition against Naples and new diplomatic marriages to buttress the Holy League against the French (recall that in 1494 Charles VIII of the House of Valois had "descended" upon Italy, invited by the Milanese, who had their sights on Florence). This included marriage of their daughter Juana to Philip of Burgundy, a union which eventually carried their line. And there was a parallel marriage of their son Juan to Philip's sister Margherite of Austria, which was later to consign the crown of Castile and Aragon to the Hapsburg, with Charles V -- the same king who later sacked Rome in 1527, -- boasting the title of "Carlo quinto de Espaňa y primero de Austria"). In addition there was the marriage of their daughter Isabella to Manuel, the new King of Portugal. Columbus had to wait four months to be received by their Highnesses; and he understood that money was scarce because one of the royal weddings saw 130 ships go to meet the new bride. Vespucci tried to help Columbus, though at the same time he did consider going back to Florence. But in Florence the scene was dominated by Girolamo Savonarola with his prophetic fire and brimstone speeches: member of a well-to-do family, if Vespucci came back he would have to take sides, which he did not want to do. He also felt Columbus was getting out of hand with his ideas about discovering the land of the fabled Amazons. More technically, he advised his friend that if he wanted to find his way to Cathay from Hispaniola, he should consider voyaging south-south west.

Now how did Vespucci know this? It was "rumored" that the Portuguese had "heard" that if one did go south-west from "Columbus' islands," that is, the Antilles, they would find mainland. Perhaps it was spies that played upon the competitive pride of the royals of Portugal and Spain (Asturia, Aragon, and Castile). Historians speculate that they must have had this knowledge when they renegotiated and ratified, with the blessings of Pope Alexander VI, the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, which extended the division line between the two then superpowers by some 270 leagues further into the Atlantic, thus automatically including the northwest corner of future Brazil. But how did they know there was this large landmass jutting into the Atlantic in 1493? More than that, Vespucci, who had studied cosmology and cartography and after five years in Seville had acquired a sense of what the returning navigators were talking about, decided at this point that he should go see for himself what was happening "out there." Hence his first of four crossings.

We have no detailed annotations of this trip, except what he recalled in 1504 when he wrote the famous *Mundus Novus* based on a Letter to gonfaloniere (standard bearer) Pier Soderini, which presumably recounts an earlier letter written in 1497 upon returning from his first trip. Much debate surrounds this letter. But if it is true, the point here is that circumstance, chance, or *occasione* as Francesco Guicciardini would put it, made the scholar, or "theoretician," Vespucci, who had never sailed until he was past forty, decide to go see first-hand these new

strange lands, and try to figure out the method of determining what the actual route, if any, to Cathay could or would be. But another way of looking at this historiographic knot is that, as we will see, Vespucci basically sabotaged Columbus.

The other example I would like to give is one revolving around the credit Vespucci gets for naming America, when the greater explorer, and the one who did in effect make the first crossing, and touched the continent at what is today Venezuela in his third voyage, was Columbus? Should not the new continent be named Columbia (as later an entire nation was, thanks to Francisco de Miranda, in 1812)? Columbus' report on his third voyage was not printed until 1504, bearing the title *Libretto de Tutta Navigatione.* It was technical, meandering, dull. His later writing, *Paesi Novamente Ritrovati*, of 1507, is written in the same style, and as one historian observed, perhaps because it was meant for eyes of very Catholic rulers, he even had to hide or twist the truth somewhat of certain social developments out of his control.

Now it is true that Columbus described flora and fauna in more detail than most other explorers, except perhaps Pedro Alvarez Cabral, but he did not, for instance, describe the sexual mores of some of the indigenous peoples he encountered. This instead Vespucci did, and for a broader public, perhaps thinking of enlightened and curious noblemen back home in faraway Florence now that Savonarola was gone and a semblance of order restored. In *Mundus Novus* he writes that the Brazilians "are so promiscuous, son cohabits with mother, brother with sister, and, in general, the women were very lustful, they apply a local poison to their man's genitals to make them swell". They were delighted to try their wiles on the newly arrived Christians. And the Europeans ate it up.

As much as the actual voyages were always dangerous, and in many instances the sponsors had to cajole or enlist as future "colonists" known criminals, jailbirds and vagabonds, the news that this other world, what Columbus had termed *Otro mundo*, offered such liberties at a time when the Church was clamping down on heretics, the Inquisition was a real and feared specter behind everybody's back, and most European societies were bracing for decades of religious strife, it was not only the scientists – the pre-Modern geographers, cosmographers, astronomers – who read this book, but high society nobles and intellectuals and, by the known trickle-down effect of the diffusion of ideas, the broader public at large, hungry to hear about this fabled, in Vespucci's title, *Mundus Novus.*

VIII.

Vespucci's little book did not speak about Columbus' "Garden of Eden," nor the lost world of Atlantis. Rather, it immediately established that it had nothing to do with all the already known and recounted strangeness of the East (recall that Marco Polo's journeys had been circulating for nearly two centuries already) or the mysterious practices of the little known African societies (outside of Egypt and the coastal Maghreb, little will be known about Africa until the XIX century.) What was presented to Europeans was, under all aspects, *a fourth world*. And as such it appeared for all eyes to see in Martin Waldsemüller 1507 map, who names what was previously labeled "terra incognita" as "America" as a tribute to Vespucci; the map was printed in 1000 copies, and was huge, 12 panels, overall 8 x 4 feet. The text of the Four expeditions was printed with a long Preface, in reality a condensed tract, on the then state of the art in cosmography.

Within a few years, forty editions of *Mundus Novus* in Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, German and Flemish, even Czech, came out. "It is astonishing -- writes Morrison, -- that a young

professor of geography in an obscure college at Saint Dié in Lorraine -- Martin Waldsemüller -- should have persuaded first Northern Europe and finally the whole world to name this New World America." (289). Yes, we can call it an "accident," a fluke, a contingency. And it did show the power of the recently "invented" new medium, the printing press, that same technology which is also responsible, ten years later, for the unexpected explosive circulation of Luther's *95 Theses,* and the beginning of the Reformation.

IX.

On another level of reflection we must place the question: who actually discovered America? We have to forego the case made about Leif Erickson who landed in Vinland five centuries earlier, or of the Namibian or Mali crossings. The Portuguese were interested in Columbus' expedition to verify whether African canoes had indeed been seen in the lower island chains of the Antilles. These did not have an impact on "us," the Euroamerican Moderns, there were no actual consequences, no new meanings were generated, no lives were affected. So the question remains: who discovered America? To whom do we attribute this huge, indeed monstruous, credit, or honor? Would it be the first sailor who howled "Tierra, Tierra" from the crow's nest in the middle of the night? Would it be the Captain of the fleet? Would it be the investor/merchant who made the loans and fitted the ships? Would it be the Crown, which gave permission to sail and stipulated that all lands discovered would have to be *de jure realis* property of Castilla y Aragon? Who decides that a piece of land is… his/hers/theirs? What about those who had *predicted* that there *would be* land? Well, now with hindsight we can say they were all wrong: for nearly 75 years no one could convince himself or others that it was *not* the outcroppings of Asia they were landing and settling, but the archipelagos in the outskirts of a different coastline, of a different continent. True, Columbus had written, in October, 1498, that "the land which God has newly given your Highnesses on this voyage must be reckoned continental in extent." He had come into a bay enclosed by two difficult straits, near what is today Trinidad and Tobago. He probably did touch mainland, present day Venezuela. He knew, because of the fresh water of the nearby estuary of the great river Orinoco, that he was in proximity of a huge landmass, not an island, but he persisted in believing that it had to be a part of that Cathay that even Marco Polo had not seen. The bellicose and antipatico Hojeda also claimed he was first to touch the continent.

However, it was Vespucci, and this to his credit, who began to think that perhaps this was a continent to the point that he collected, organized, "processed" all the then known information and set out, in the next, his alleged third, but to some his second and last voyage, to prove that *that* was the case, when he landed further south, past the Amazon delta, and then, rounding present day Recife, went all the way down to present day Rio de Janeiro and beyond. Presumably he reached Patagonia, but he never mentions the Rio de La Plata, which he could not have missed if he hugged the coast as he says he did.

X.

What established this particular journey, or voyage, as foundational for a new knowledge, was the fact that Vespucci called it, "a New World…a continent more densely peopled and abounding in animals than our Europe or Asia or Africa; and, in addition, a climate milder and more delightful than any other region known to us." And that is the reason why, according to

most historians, he should get credit. His text is actually more detailed because perhaps he also compared or collated what other voyages going on at the same time were reporting. No flora or fauna or natives matched any of the existing known or imagined reference points in the European scientific corpus of knowledge. This was an unexpected territory, indeed world, and one which required that new names be invented, new maps drawn. One which directly or indirectly played into the growing secularization, for despite the immediate attempts by Church authorities to Christianize the heathen, the lives and practices of the new people were clearly a threat to established dogma, as much as they were to existing knowledge. Las Casas describes how theologians started asking whether these natives were really people as they doubted they possesses a soul. But most settlers had no trouble grasping that these natives could easily be exploited for other ends. We could also go on into how, within a few decades, Europeans learned of new crops, such as potato and tomato and corn, and new diseases, such as syphilis, while the natives learned of the wheel, the horse, the dog, steel and gunpowder, and… smallpox.

But to answer the question about the journey to discover the unknown: to me it is not so much a scientific question as a sociopolitical and indeed a mythological question: America was discovered by a whole bunch of different people who harbored a variety of interests, and who for the preceding forty years struggled to find new trading partners to the West, as the traditional commercial routes to and with Eastern lands were long, overcrowded even, expensive. And now very dangerous, as new empires took over. On this, both Broome and Boyle agree on the cruciality of the epochal and objectively describable event, the taking of Constantinople in 1453 by the Turks. That is the date which spurs the most diversified agencies in Europe – the clergy, merchants, aristocrats, artisans, homeowners and basically everyone involved in any sort of commerce, -- to seek alternative routes to the East, especially once the Black Sea was closed. Genoa and Venice took a debilitating blow to their Mediterranean hegemony. Yes, there was the religious concern that Christianity itself was in danger of being overrun by the advancing Ottoman Turks, and this did congeal a renewed sense of an "us versus them," a "being European," as Pius the II noted (local or regional differences notwithstanding), against being an Oriental or an Arab or a Turk; but it is the wheels of economics and the legitimizing power of Discourse which together first provide a venue for these super-structural ideas and point the compass elsewhere for homo viator

As for the identities of the explorers, there was no "Italy" back in 1500 that justifies our speaking of Columbus, Caboto, Vespucci as being "Italian explorers:" these are discursive retrojections heavily influenced by the ideologies and mythemes of XIX century nationalism. In reality there were several city-states and regional powers over the peninsula, and not yet a standard language, other than Latin. Moreover, as Braudel, McNeill, Wallerstein and others have argued, in the 16th century, these individual travelers – navigators, explorers, conquerors, refugees, escapees, vagabonds, pirates *and* scientists -- were at the service of empires and the nascent global trading networks that were exploding out of the confines of the "Mare Nostrum" and tracing commercial lines through or better over a constantly unfolding liquid world, both as refurbished earth and as reframed universe. They were rather individuals with hybrid identities, with constructed selves anchored to realities of place, politics and economics which saw them live in, learn the language of, and be subject to, a variety of sociopolitical configurations.

XI.

Two final thoughts. Some 15 years ago I wrote an essay on travel in which I reflected upon the use of the word-concept, or the idea, of travel as a master metaphor which has been appropriated by science and by philosophy. Words like pioneer, explorer, inventor, and locutions like finding the right way (i.e.: the right method), disclosing new horizons, march into unknown territory, chart unsounded seasetc., , furrow virgin lands, became part of our everyday vocabulary. What I would like to add to that, and stimulus for new research, is the fact that after these voyagers, in the aftermath of the Age of Discovery, we as Westerners begin to develop the sense that *the journey is endless*. Before 1492, the *arché*, or Master Trope, offered two possibilities: it was either Homeric, wherein the transit involved going out on a mission and then return, the idea of *nostos*, to Ithaca, or home. Or else it pointed to the Pilgrimage, the journey to a Sanctified locus in which some sort of revelation, purgation, or salvation was to be achieved, such as Santiago de Compostela, Jerusalem, Rome, Mecca and others. After the XVI century, that is, at the beginning of Modernity, the journey no longer has a fixed destination. Humans will increasingly criss-cross the earth, the globe, defining and redefining the world. The *Novus* is now constantly dis-covered and just as persistently moved continually forward, or slipping away. In fact, *modern subjectivity is borne out of the awareness that the origin is something forever behind, and the destination is forever a place to try to reach, though not truly attainable*. Along the way, when do we stop and build Cathedrals and Monuments to Justice and Science, we devise a congealed rhetoric, called a logic, the backbone of epistemology, that gives us the assurance that the objects (both as substance and as ideation) are real, "objective" we typically say. Yet we are fully aware (or maybe not, as some still cling to Immutable Forms and Eternal Gods) that the whole can be uprooted, our mental cathedrals blown away, and even our family history erased each and every time get invaded, or stepped on by tyrannies, or suffer some natural disaster, or generally get radically altered when we are forced to move on. We then essay to "save" whatever we can of the sense of the metamorphic self, the transitory being-in-this-world-at-this-time-and-place. We also write histories and create myths about our cherished values, we claim primacy over our neighbors and enemies, we vie for privilege over our own kin and kind, and of course as Vico noted, we claim for our "nations" noble origins. We translate that into perennial roots! when a look at a world historical map would show that humans have always been in transit. Thus the ontic reality is that change, movement, traveling, go into shaping the mildly amorphous ontological constitution of humans, which can be broadly expressed this way: *migration is the engine of history and the unstable ground of subjectivity*. We might say that at the very heart of Modernity there arises a *hodoeporics*, the constantly unsettling creativity and challenging narrative experience of the journeys themselves. And those are endless, true to the ancient sentence, *errare humanum est.*

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