

## The Editor's Foreword

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The impact of Amerigo Vespucci's reports on the New World can hardly be overestimated. When Nicolaus Copernicus ignited the 'astronomical revolution' through his epoch-making message that a radically different, mathematically founded vision of the cosmos was possible, he introduced his heliocentric theory as the astronomical counterpart of the geographical shift that had already been produced by Vespucci's announcement that another continent existed – a *New World*, according to the title of the latter's most famous work *Mundus novus* (1503). As one reads in Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* I,3 (1543), the most prominent astronomer and geographer of Hellenistic antiquity, Ptolemy, had transmitted to the posterity a narrow image of the habitable world as this, according to him, occupied only half of the globe; the moderns expanded their geographical knowledge through the exploration of thus-far unknown regions, both in the east and in the west. This concerned China (*Cathagya*), new islands discovered by the Spaniards and the Portuguese,

and especially America, named after the ship's captain who found it. On account of its still undisclosed size it is thought to be a second group of inhabited countries. [...] So little reason have we to marvel at the existence of antipodes or antichthones. Indeed, geometrical reasoning about the location of America compels us to believe that it is diametrically opposite the Ganges district of India.<sup>1</sup>

The Copernican theory of the planetary earth that rotates around the sun constituted a drastic emendation of Ptolemy's *Almagest* that was akin to the emendation of Ptolemy's *Geography*, which was perceived as a necessary shift in the age of Columbus, Vespucci, and Magellan. The discoveries of the seafarers who navigated under the flags of the Iberian kings brought about profound changes in the knowledge of the globe we inhabit and the way we represent it. Vespucci clearly perceived the philosophical import of the novelties he witnessed:

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolaus Copernicus: *On the Revolutions*, 10. Cf. *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*. Nuremberg: Petreius, 1543: f. 2r.

These [regions] we may rightly call a new world. Because our ancestors had no knowledge of them, and it will be a matter wholly new to all those who hear about them. For this transcends the view held by our ancients.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of the controversy over the ancients and the moderns, in which modern ingenuity was extolled against the mere authority of the ancients, Copernicus' astronomy was to become the scientific revolution *par excellence*. Yet, in the background of the scientific achievements of the moderns, there is a complex - and often tragic and violent - history of maritime travels, political intrigues, military expansion, and economic interests.

The Renaissance physician, mathematician, and philosopher Girolamo Cardano lucidly perceived that European globalization marked a cultural turning point, and also indicated the scientific-technological means that made it possible. In his autobiography, *De vita propria liber*, Cardano presents the three canonical technologies of modernity - gunpowder, the compass, and the printing press - as the most remarkable "natural prodigies observed, rare though, in my life". As important as they are, all of them are overshadowed by the geographical discoveries of his time. The marvel at the encounter with the unknown emerges from his list of novel localities to be added to the atlases - some of them are perhaps imaginary; all of them imagination triggering:

Among the extraordinary, though quite natural circumstances of my life, the first and most unusual is that I was born in the century in which the whole world became known; whereas the ancients were familiar with but little more than a third part of it.

On the one hand we explore America - I now refer to the part peculiarly designated by that name - Brazil, a great part of which was before unknown, Terra del Fuego, Patagonia, Peru, Charcas, Parana, Acutia, Caribana, Picora, New Spain, Quito, of Quinira the more western part, New France and regions more to the south of this toward Florida, Cortereal, Estotilant, and Marata. Besides all these, toward the east under the Antarctic we find the Antiscians somewhat like Scythians, and some Northern peoples not yet known, as well as Japan, Binarchia, the Amazonas, and a region which is beyond the Island of the Demons, if these be not fabled islands - all discoveries sure to give rise to great and calamitous events in order that a just distribution of them may be maintained.<sup>3</sup>

The expansion of geographical knowledge corresponded to a reconfiguration of geopolitics. A planetary consciousness - which still constitutes an uncompleted task today - began to emerge in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a consequence of cross-cultural encounters and clashes and because of the formation of the first 'planetary Empire' - that of Charles V, on which "the sun never set".

This book reconstructs the individual and collective vicissitudes that gave birth to our modernity through an attentive study of key textual and cartographic sources enabling us to trace the origins of the idea of a fourth continent, to comprehend the reasons it was given the name of 'America' after

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<sup>2</sup> Amerigo Vespucci: *Mundus Novus*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Cardano, *The Book of My Life*, 189 (posthumous).

its 'announcer' and to understand the century-long polemics caused by the ascription of its 'discovery' to Vespucci.

It is a special honour for me to inaugurate this series in the socio-political history of early modern science with a book written by a person who is dear to me, my grandfather Pietro, whose passionate study of nature, philosophy, and history has provided me with an invaluable example. This publication aims to inspire further inquiries into the early-modern roots of the scientific world we live in.

Venice, January 2020  
Pietro Daniel Omodeo

