

E. Natalie ROTHMAN, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012. Pp. XXII & 323. Eight monochrome illustrations and one map. ISBN 978-0-8014-4907-9 (hardback). \$45.00.

‘Trans-imperial subjects’ is Natalie Rothman’s term for the Levantine migrants who went to Venice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Three main groups of migrants are studied: commercial brokers; religious converts and official interpreters. Rothman has carried out detailed research in the archives of Venice and supplements her numerous primary source quotes with transcriptions of the original Italian texts. Twelve complete documents are included in the ‘Appendix’, either as transcriptions or translations or both.

Rothman’s aim is to ‘capture the ways in which trans-imperial subjects straddled and helped broker linguistic, religious and geopolitical boundaries across Venetian and Ottoman imperial domains’. ‘[T]he formulation of a sharp, pre-existing and absolute dichotomy between “European” and “non-European” epistemologies’ inspired by Edward Saïd’s *Orientalism* (1978) is deemed inadequate since ‘this dichotomy cannot account for the sustained nature of most colonial engagements and for the role of intermediaries in calibrating and recalibrating the boundaries of the very units they claim to mediate’. However, Rothman does not seek to ‘anachronistically celebrate the early modern Mediterranean as a site of multiculturalism’. On the contrary, she emphasizes ‘the context of rivalry and tacit collaboration between Ottomans and Venetians’ and sees Venice ‘as a node in a much broader trans-imperial field of power’.

The chronological scope of the book has been largely determined by the survival of relevant archival sources, but this fits conveniently with ‘a watershed period in the history of the Mediterranean, roughly the century from the battle of Lepanto in 1571 to the end of the War of Crete in 1669’. This period is seen as, for both the Ottomans and Venetians, as a time of crisis and transformation. In addition to military, political and economic changes, there was also a hardening of religious divisions influenced by a wider process of ‘confessionalization’.

Part I ‘Mediation’ concerns those migrants who sought employment as commercial brokers. Chapter 1 analyzes the petitions that aspirant brokers addressed to the Board of Trade. In each case the supplicants emphasized their personal loyalty to Venice, while also highlighting the skills and connections which would make them valuable intermediaries for foreign merchants. Chapter 2 examines the trials of unlicensed brokers heard by the brokers’ guild tribunal.

Part II ‘Conversion’ concerns converts to Catholicism. Rothman follows the example of those who study religious conversion ‘as a set of historically shifting social practices rather than as individual spiritual choices’. In other words, ‘not so much *why* people converted but *how*’. Chapter 3 examines the records of converts’ confessions and interrogations from the Holy Office (i.e. Venetian Inquisition), the matrimonial examinations from the Patriarchal Curia and baptismal records from the Holy House of Catechumens. Muslim converts emphasized how changes to their personal circumstances led to their conversion, whereas Protestant converts insisted that inner spiritual transformation preceded a personal decision to become Catholics. Similar contrasts are found to exist between the testimonies of male and female repentant renegades and between Jewish and Muslim female converts. Chapter 4 focuses on the Holy House of Catechumens, which facilitated charitable patronage through ‘the negotiation of converts’ adoption contracts, dowries, apprenticeships, and employment opportunities and the periodic disbursement of alms’. Rather than undergoing a radical break with the past and a transformation of personal status, Rothman finds that ‘most converts eventually found themselves occupying the same status and trade they had held prior to their conversion. Many also remained dependent on charity from the House of Catechumens for years after their baptism, if not for life’.

Part III ‘Translation’ consists of a single chapter about ‘the emergence of specialised Public Dragomans, official interpreters employed by the Venetian Board of Trade to assist Ottoman subjects while sojourning in Venice’. ‘Claiming specialized knowledge by virtue of their trans-imperial life trajectories and having immediate access to the highest echelons of the Venetian political elite in the Board of Trade and Senate, dragomans came to play a powerful role in defining who and what could be deemed properly foreign in Venice’.

Part IV 'Articulation' explores 'the role of trans-imperial subjects in articulating ethnolinguistic taxonomies in the Venetian-Ottoman borderlands'. Chapter 6 recounts the early history of the 'Fondaco dei Turchi', the well-known hostel for Ottoman Muslim merchants, as well as controversies over the *terzo* ('one third') tax on brokers' commissions: Merchants sought exemption from both the hostel and the tax by asserting linguistic and religious differences. Chapter 7 traces 'the haphazard and gradual articulation of the category "Levantini" ("Levantine") in the Venetian commercial sphere to show how its shifting semantic range and prototypical meanings were closely linked to distinct sites and moments of institutionalization. [...] Furthermore, its differing articulations stemmed from the conflation of three distinct, although interrelated, dimensions for understanding difference in the early modern Mediterranean: political jurisdiction, confessional affiliation, and ethno-linguistic identity'. Rothman argues that 'this conflation itself was the result of trans-imperial subjects' efforts to commensurate Venetian and Ottoman (at times conflicting) reasons of state for their own varied strategic purposes'.

In a short 'Afterword', Rothman asserts that 'trans-imperial subjects [...] is a useful analytical category for understanding an intermediary group of individuals, neither fully Venetian nor foreign, who actively engaged [with] a host of Venetian institutions'. In conclusion, she claims that '[u]nderstanding the trans-imperial dimensions of early modern cultural mediation thus helps document the emergence of boundaries now so ingrained that their very historicity is often forgotten. It also calls into question the motivations of those who benefited – and still do – from naturalizing the boundaries that, at the beginning of the period under study, were anything but natural'.

The book's subtitle and opening remarks about integrating the Ottoman Empire suggest that equal weight will be given to both Venetians and Ottomans, but Rothman's study is concerned almost exclusively with Venice. Nonetheless, she maintains the false pretence that she has given equal attention to the Ottomans by referring to 'Venice and Istanbul, the two important early modern centers of cultural production examined here'. What Rothman does write about the Ottoman Empire includes some puzzling, unsubstantiated assertions. A summary of the Ottomans' formative influences ignores Persia, as well as the reinvigoration of their Muslim identity following their conquest of the Mamluks. We are later informed that 'the overwhelming majority of converts to Islam in the early modern Ottoman Empire were not child recruits'. If this is meant to refer to the breakdown of the *devshirme* child levy in the seventeenth century, then that is hardly an adequate basis for such a dogmatic statistical assertion about the entire 'early modern' era. There is also a reference to 'the Muslim and Jewish traditions in which converts were often given names that singled them out as converts' and an inaccurate reference to the sultan's concubines as 'sultanas'. Although she makes no other use of Turkish language scholarship, Rothman cites an unpublished Turkish Ph. D. thesis as her only point of reference on Ottoman 'Grand Dragomans' (p. 167 n. 8).

Despite discarding Saïd's 'Orientalism' thesis as inadequate, Rothman still uses the term and also uses 'other' as a noun in the manner popularised by Saïd. Rothman insists that the Ottoman Empire should not be considered an objectified, alien 'Other' in Venetian historiography, but claims that Venetian self-perception nonetheless did involve the 'mythic representation' of objectified 'Others'. However, this division was not insurmountable, since religious conversion enabled the 'transformation' of 'others' into Venetians. Nor were attitudes fixed and unchanging, since 'trans-imperial practitioners' helped to 'shape Venetian notions of Ottoman otherness' and influence the development of 'Orientalism'. Rothman sees strong elements of continuity between sixteenth and seventeenth centuries 'practices' and the 'nascent discipline of Orientalism', but she does not view these 'practices' positively: She rejects 'visions of European pre-Enlightenment innocence'.

Ultimately, Rothman seems to share many of Saïd's ideological assumptions and appears oblivious to the fact that his 'Orientalism' thesis was comprehensively refuted by several prominent critics within his own life time. Her opening remarks about a 'trans-imperial field of power' appear to endorse a power theory of politics, while any evidence for a rights theory of politics based on 'civic and moral obligations' is dismissed as 'myth' concealing underlying power relationships. She believes that 'scholarship and activism' should go hand-in-hand.

Throughout the book, Rothman promotes her ‘analytical category’ of ‘trans-imperial subjects’ and repeats the phrase fifteen times in the ‘Afterword’ (pp. 248–251). ‘Trans-imperial’ is an adaptation of ‘transnational’, but Rothman only mentions that the latter term has ‘become fashionable’ without giving any explanation of its origins and usage (p.3 n. 7). She rejects the words ‘nation’ and ‘citizen’, since they invite teleological assumptions, but this rejection is ill-conceived. She is fully aware of the more flexible ‘late medieval and early modern’ usage of the word ‘nation’ which is the sense in which Benjamin Arbel and Eric Dursteler both use the word. More importantly, ‘nation’ appears frequently in Rothman’s own primary sources, so she is ultimately forced to adopt it herself anyway. She also still makes numerous references to both Venetian ‘subjects’ and ‘citizens’.

This vague use of political terms results in a confusing portrayal of Venetian government and society. There are references to ‘the strong imperial (alongside oligarchic and republican) dimensions of Venetian governmentality’ (p. 12) and the seemingly contradictory ‘imperial enterprise of projecting the self-image of Venice as a Christian republic’ (p.161), but there is no mention of attempts to reconcile these different elements in the classical ideal of the mixed constitution.

The ‘Levant’ and ‘Levantine’ were variously used to refer to both Ottoman and Safavid subjects (p. 212), Sephardic Jews (p. 213), the Venetian colonies (p. 215), the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean (p. 216), Venice itself (p. 217) and to both Muslims (p. 245.f) and non-Muslims (p. 228.f). In other words, ‘Levantine’ embraces all the various categories covered by Rothman’s study. *Levantine Migrants in Venice, 1570–1670* would therefore be a more accurate title for the book.

The term ‘trans-imperial subjects’ is only the most prominent example of Rothman’s preference for abstruse language. She prefers needlessly obscure, complex words such as ‘juxtaposition’ and semantically distorts clear words by adding superfluous suffixes, as with ‘governmentality’ and ‘differential’. This style of writing is often attributed to the influence of the social sciences, where it is apparently deemed to be more scientific. It is therefore significant that Rothman’s doctorate was in ‘Anthropology and History’ and that anthropologists continue to exert a strong influence on her work. Yet her use of words does not provide scientific precision. On the contrary, it is a serious impediment to actually engaging with her scholarship.

Many highly qualified academics have already had the opportunity to ask Rothman to clarify her language. In addition to the relevant staff at Cornell University Press, the manuscript was read by ‘numerous’ friends and colleagues including fourteen named individuals. The back cover of the book reproduces resounding endorsements from Natalie Zemon Davis, Edward Muir and Leslie Peirce. The latter even claims that the book is ‘beautifully written’.

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Johann PETITJEAN, *L'Intelligence des choses. Une histoire de l'information entre Italie et Méditerranée (XVI<sup>e</sup>–XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, Rome, Ecole Française de Rome, 2013, 519 p.

Cet ouvrage est le résultat d’un travail opiniâtre qui, en reprenant un sujet plusieurs fois étudié par séquences, lui donne enfin la cohérence nécessaire. Ce renouvellement a été obtenu par une longue exploration des archives vénitienes, Vaticanes et ragusaines. Quiconque s’est jamais plongé dans cet océan se rend compte de la connaissance que le chercheur acquiert de la toile d’araignée tissée par dessus la Méditerranée et sur la rive chrétienne afin de transmettre des nouvelles. Ce que l’auteur a eu l’ambition de nous offrir est beaucoup plus: une analyse pétrée de philosophie, et même de sociologie, de la manière dont une information est communiquée, à partir des premiers *avis* (*avvisi*) jusqu’à arriver à l’internet. Cette démarche, sans être indispensable, s’efforce de dégager la transformation de la diplomatie dès la fin du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, lorsqu’elle a évolué vers l’accumulation des renseignements. D’autre part, *avis* ne veut pas dire seulement avertissement, mais aussi conseil. Pour abrégé, il s’agit de trois personnages mis en scène: l’informateur au départ, le courrier, l’espion; seulement trois, car l’avisé va devenir aussitôt, à son tour, informateur. L’espace examiné est structuré sur l’axe principal Venise – Rome – Istanbul, entre les limites chronologiques 1570–1669.