The Last Dragomans: Teaching Oriental Languages in Late-Nineteenth Century Venice

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In the summer of 1867, the Venetian economist and future Prime Minister of Italy Luigi Luzzatti (1841-1927) spent several weeks in Belgium, where he was highly impressed by the Institut supérieur de commerce of Antwerp. Upon his return to Italy, he drew on that model to create the Scuola Superiore di Commercio of Venice, which would soon become a proper university, now known as Ca' Foscari. But Luzzatti also wished to differentiate the *scuola veneziana* from the *école anversienne*. He decided that one way to rival the Belgian educational institution in fame and prestige was to offer classes in "Oriental languages". Nothing of the sort existed anywhere else in Europe. He predicted that such courses would attract Italian, English, French, and German students to Venice and would give the new school a proper European character.

My research aims to reconstruct this cultural project, conceived by Luzzatti in the aftermath of the annexation of Venice to the Kingdom of Italy and realized by the academic staff of the Higher School of Commerce beginning in 1868. During the first twenty years of its activity, the Venetian school introduced courses in Arabic, Turkish, Modern Greek, and Japanese; it established a small but valuable library of pertinent texts; it hired native-speaking scholars from Aleppo, Constantinople, Athens, and Tokyo; and it trained a small pool of students in Commercial and Oriental studies with the goal of allowing them to become interpreters in European Consulates in the

Middle East and East Asia. In one of his private notebooks, Luzzatti referred to these students as the "last dragomans".
During my presentation, I will talk about the reasons why this project was born, the individuals who shaped it, the ideas that nourished it, and the reasons why it failed. In the following pages, I will outline the historical, cultural, and economic background that will hopefully make my presentation clearer.

Around the mid-nineteenth century, riding the wave of the commercial revolution that, according to Jürgen Osterhammel, was sparked by the inventions of the telegraph, the steamship, and the railways, a new model of academic education began to spread across Europe, embodied by the so-called Higher Schools of Commerce. Following the one founded in Antwerp in 1852, similar schools were established in Paris (1854), Vienna (1856), and Mulhouse (1866). The main subjects taught at these establishments were the history of commerce and its chief commodities, commercial geography, maritime law, accounting, bookkeeping, calligraphy, as well as some European languages such as French, German, and English. The goal of these schools was to train young people to enter the changing world of commerce of the time. During his visit to Antwerp, Luzzatti met the School's director (Gustave Metdepenningen) and engaged in long conversations with both teachers and students. Yet, more than on the people, he focused on the numbers. In his travel notebook, he meticulously recorded the cost of all the items he would need to create a business plan for the future Higher School of Commerce in Venice.
Back in Italy, Luzzatti presented his project first to the Consiglio provinciale of Venice, then to the Consiglio comunale, subsequently to the Chamber of Commerce, and finally to the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce. He explained that the school would bring prestige to the city, wealth to the region, and address a national need. He received praise and financial support from all entities. The existence of an

effective model like the one in Antwerp was seen as a guarantee of success, all the more so since he proposed a faithful application of it. Or almost.

In addition to the curriculum offered in Antwerp, Luzzatti proposed a track to prepare students as career diplomats or interpreters. Besides French, English, Spanish, and German, students enrolled in this track would also study Turkish, Arabic, and Persian (Japanese would be added later). This was a small but crucial addition, as no other European school of commerce offered such classes, and even the great European universities had little interest in Oriental languages.

Although it had always been subordinate to the study of Hebrew and biblical exegesis, the only language with a solid academic tradition was Arabic. The "Republic of Arabic letters" is how Alexander Bevilacqua has called the community of Western scholars who, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, devoted themselves to study Arabic. However, this community of scholars, while geographically spread across Europe, was numerically small, made up of a handful of biblical scholars, erudites, and polygraphs. Moreover, they studied a dead language, not the Arabic spoken by everyday people. In contrast, Luzzatti, who was born in the era of steamships and railways, viewed the knowledge of Eastern languages as an essential tool for trade – something both a young nation state like Italy and an ancient port city like Venice should possess.

To be fair, the University of Cambridge had created an Arabic chair for commercial purposes as early as 1632 (a second one was added in 1724), but the approach to the language was largely philological and literary. The same could be said of the chair established at the University of Oxford in 1636 (also doubled in 1724), whose first holder was Edward Pococke, chaplain of the Levant Company in Aleppo. In Protestant Germany, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the study of Arabic was so tied to biblical scholarship that interest in trade had never become a consideration. This lack of interest was also evident in the humanists who taught Arabic at Leiden,

Paris, and Rome. In short, in modern European universities, the encounter with the East had been a matter strictly focused on texts.
Things began to change during the nineteenth century, when Oriental studies and European colonialism became inextricably intertwined. Recent studies have shed light on the essential role played by Arabists in French colonial politics. However, even Italy, despite its late imperialism, was able to rely on the help of some Orientalists to sharpen its expansionist ambitions. One of these was the missionary Giuseppe Sapeto (1811-1895), who in 1864 was appointed by the Minister of Public Education Michele Amari (the leading Italian Arabist of the nineteenth century and author of a monumental *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*) to the new chair of Arabic at the Technical Institute of Genoa (i.e. a high school, not a higher one).
After nearly thirty years spent in Syria, Ethiopia, and Eritrea serving the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (a congregation of the Roman Curia established in 1662, responsible for missionary work), Sapeto moved to Paris in 1859, where he met Amari and collaborated with him on cataloging the Arabic manuscripts of the Imperial Library. Lured by the mirage of empire rather than the word of Jesus, in 1862 he left the priesthood, settled in Genoa, and devoted himself to teaching Arabic, while continuing to offer colonial advice to emperors, ministers, and shipowners from various nations. His attachment to the imperialist cause became evident even in his lectures in Genoa.
In his inaugural speech for the 1864 course, for example, Sapeto glorified the history of Genoa, the homeland of the first navigators, emphasizing that for that city, the East was not only a past conquest but also a manifest destiny. For this reason, in addition to the language, he aimed to teach his students the science, literature, history, and geography of the Arabs. Only in this way could they “anthropologically understand” the “Eastern society” with which they were destined to have “a mixture of great interests”. Finally, after predicting the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Sapeto

fantasized about the moment when Italy would plant "its white cross on the minarets of mosques as a beacon of Christian civilization".
Nothing could be further from the educational project that Luzzatti would develop three years later. Even if one were to carefully examine the founding documents of the Higher School of Commerce of Venice, there would be no trace of the imperialist ideology spreading through late nineteeth-century Italy, a movement that even Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the key-figures of the Italian Risorgimento but the least involved in such debates, referred to as "an inevitable drive calling Europe to civilize the African regions".
In these late nineteenth-century Venetian documents, what stands out is rather the ancient mercantile spirit of the Serenissima. Luzzatti's project was indeed tailored to Venice, which had been waiting for almost seventy years – since its fall to Napoleon in 1797 – for an opportunity to reignite, in Luzzatti's words, "the spark of its commercial genius".
That opportunity came in 1868, thanks to the conjunction of two historic events for Venice. The first was its annexation to the Kingdom of Italy as a consequence of the Italian victory over Austria in the Third (and last) War of Independence in 1866. Although the Austrian forces had defeated the Italian ones both at the Battle of Custoza and at the Battle of Lissa, the victory of Prussia (an ally of Italy) at the Battle of Sadowa forced Austria to surrender. According to the terms of the Treaty of Vienna, the Austrians agreed to hand over Veneto to Napoleon III, knowing that he would then cede it to the king of Italy Vittorio Emanuele II. By the end of October, the population overwhelmingly voted in favor of accepting Italian unification. For the first time in its history, Venice had at last become Italian.
The second event was the opening of the Suez Canal, a passage between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea (thus also between the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean) that would change the European geographic vision of the globe,

shorten the voyages between Europe and Asia, and increase the commercial exchanges with South and East Asia. For at least some European countries this was indeed the case. Built between 1859 and 1869 by the Compagnie universelle du canal maritime de Suez, headed by the French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps, the Suez Canal led to a massive increase in traffic with the East. In 1870, 486 ships transited through it; in 1871, the number rose to 765, and for the rest of the decade, the figure remained around 1,400, surpassing 2,000 in 1880 and 3,600 in 1885. Around that time, the United Kingdom was transiting over 5,000,000 tons of goods, out of nearly 6,800,000 tons, with the remaining amount divided to a decreasing extent among France, Germany, Italy, and Austria.

During the fifty-year Austrian domination, Venice's economy had suffered a considerable decline, which the granting of general tax exemption in 1829 had failed to halt. The superiority of the port of Trieste, which already boasted a fleet of steamships at the time, became overwhelming after the completion of the Southern Railway in 1857 (a double-track railway linking Vienna to Trieste). However, the annexation of Veneto to Italy managed to rekindle the hope for the city's revival among its people. Almost as if it were an opportunity presented by fate, the construction of the Suez Canal seemed to promise Venice a central role in maritime trade once again. It was exactly from this collective illusion that stemmed the idea of creating a Higher School of Commerce, with a special focus on teaching oriental languages.

The importance of this condition was clear to anyone familiar with the history of Venice. Since the mid-sixteenth century, Venetian ambassadors to the Ottoman Empire had repeatedly raised the issue of training competent and trustful "dragomans", who, in the words of historian E. Natalie Rothman, were "diplomatic translator-interpreters who accompanied ambassadors on their audiences and acted, ritually, as their mouth and ears, mediating the unfolding ceremony". In response to

their requests, the Senate of the Serenissima had first established a "Scuola dei giovani di lingua" at the venetian diplomatic residence in Constantinople, in 1551, then a course of Oriental languages in Venice, in 1692, and eventually a school of Oriental studies in Padua, in 1744.

All these institutions experienced ups and downs, but the educational model they were based on had been admired and imitated by many countries, particularly by France, where, in 1669, the First Minister of State Jean-Baptiste Colbert created the École des jeunes de langues on that model. Both the Venetian and the French schools were characterized by two main features: the teaching of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian (and in parallel, Greek) as an integral part of the curriculum, and the exclusive use of native-speaking teachers. Although in an entirely new historical context, this was precisely the model proposed by Luzzatti in the founding project for the Higher School of Commerce. And even the solution he had found, at least initially, to solve the problem of recruiting teachers was similar: to knock on the door of an Armenian monastery.

In 1717, the Senate of the Venetian Republic had ceded the small island of San Lazzaro in its lagoon to a Catholic Armenian priest, Pietro Manuk, better known as Mekhitar, who built there a Benedictine Monastery. Mekhitar soon gathered around him young disciples, whom he educated to the values of charity and culture. One hundred and fifty years later, the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni – as it was now universally known – had become a cultural center of European renown, led by the illustrious poet and theologian Ghevond Alishan and equipped with a polyglot printing press that had produced over 600 volumes until then. Although it had always been separate from the city's life, in 1868 the Mechitarist Congregation agreed to the Municipality of Venice's request to provide a professor of Oriental languages for the newly founded Higer School of Commerce.

Over time, however, Luzzatti realized that having just one professor of Oriental languages was not enough. He therefore decided to expand the number of chairs – one for each language – and to create effectively a school within a school. This “scuola di lingue orientali” would be based, for nearly twenty years, in a 45-square-meter room on the second floor of the patrician palace on the Grand Canal, Ca’ Foscari, which housed the Higher School of Commerce. There, day after day, a small but dedicated group of teachers from various parts of the East would teach what they called the “living Oriental languages” to the last generation of Venetian dragomans.

As I have tried to describe so far, Luzzatti's idea was based on an opportunity, fostered by an ambition, and linked to a tradition. Applying for government funding from the Minister of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce, Luzzatti highlighted precisely this set of circumstances: "Thanks to the contract signed with the famous Mechitarist monks, the Municipality of Venice is finally ready to organize courses in Oriental languages at the Higher School of Commerce, where, consequently, students will be able to learn not only European languages, but also Modern Greek, Arabic, and Persian. Modern Greek and Arabic undoubtedly represent the keys to enter another Continent, and the Venetian School would consequently become a real Academy of the Commercial Languages of Europe and the East [...] And when the construction of the Suez Canal is completed, thanks to the Higher School of Commerce and its courses in Oriental languages, Venice will overtake Antwerp and become the guardian and protector of all Eastern commercial traditions, to which the memory of our past and the promises of our future bind us".

In my presentation, I will revisit key passages in this text and continue the narrative of this cultural project, which was, as I will attempt to explain, both pioneering and anachronistic, a sort of fracture in the history of both Italian and European orientalism.

For those interested in reading further about the topics touched upon in the previous pages, these are a few relevant works in English: Zachary Karabell, *Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004; Richard J. B. Bosworth, *Italian Venice: A History*, New Haven - London, Yale University Press, 2014; Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, translated by Patrick Camiller, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2015; Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2018; E.

Natalie Rothman, *The Dragoman Renaissance: Diplomatic Interpreters and the Routes of Orientalism*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 2021.