

Ricardo Padrón

*The Indies of the Setting Sun:  
How Early Modern Spain Mapped the Far East as the  
Transpacific West*

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What did a man who lived in the first decades of the sixteenth century think while looking at a planisphere on which the western edges of recently discovered America were not yet marked? Did he know that it was a new continent, just as we would spontaneously tend to think today, or did he imagine something different? Would he even use the word America to call those lands, or other labels such as New World, or Indies? These are just some of the epochal questions that Ricardo Padrón tries to answer with his latest book: *The Indies of the Setting Sun: How Early Modern Spain Mapped the Far East as the Transpacific West*.

The author's aim in this recent effort is ambitious but the reader will not be disappointed. Padrón, in fact, leads his audience on a real journey through time, dismantling many commonplaces and prejudices about the modern perception of the way the world has been thought of and represented on maps at the dawn of modernity. The author breaks the patterns in the way we think about historical cartography between rigid categories of 'right and wrong', 'precise and approximate'. Instead, Padrón highlights a complex historical process in which different cultural and political theories competed with each other in a dialectic that shaped our way of understanding geography.

The purpose of the author's methodology, which masterfully combines a refined analysis of sixteenth century literary and cartographic sources with the deconstruction of modern preconceptions on the subject, is to show the attempt of political and cultural engineering made by Spain in order to master, homogenize, and psychologically control a vast and indeterminate space such as the Pacific Ocean. In 1494, in fact, the Treaty of Tordesillas had assigned to Spain the western hemisphere of the earth, including the immense extension of what we call today the Pacific

Ocean. However, in Tordesillas some issues were left open. At the time of the treaty, the contracting parties, Spain and Portugal, had not considered with due attention the problem of the location of the antimeridian, and they did not yet know what was beyond the recently discovered American continent. Only with the first sighting of that immense sea in 1513, back then called *Mar del Sur* (the South Sea), thanks to Vasco Nunez de Balboa, and especially with the first crossing of that sea by Ferdinand Magellan, Spain would have had an idea of how large it was. The story told by Padron, therefore, is the story of how this immense vastness, once understood, was the object of a political project aimed at changing the emptiness into a tamable space over which to exercise its sovereignty.

In order to introduce the reader to this perspective, all in all understandable although not easily conceivable by the contemporary eye, so used to think about the world according to the criteria of modern cartography, the author explains his own amazement when in the course of his research he came across a description of the state of New Mexico within the second edition of one of the best-selling books of the early modern Spanish-speaking world, the *Historia de las cosas mas notables, ritos, y costumbres del gran Reino de la China*, published in Madrid in 1585 by Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza. This example is enlightening to make us understand how the very concept of America, meant as a continent in the modern meaning of this word, although not absent in the 16th century, nevertheless represented a minority share in the system of political conceptualization of the Pacific Ocean. As Padrón explains the dominant idea used to conceptualize the lands bordering the Pacific Ocean was that of the Indies, a term capable of defining such a vast space as a coherent whole: *Las Indias del Norte* (the North Indies, now North America), the *Las Indias del Sur* (South Indies, now South America), and the *Las Indias del Poniente* (the West Indies, corresponding to the Philippines and the Moluccas).

As Padrón explains, among the theories that were developed and survived throughout the sixteenth century to support this conceptual construction was that of an Amerasian continuity confronted with a theory of an untraversable Pacific. This idea is heir to Columbus' initial belief that he had arrived in Asia rather than discovering a new land in 1492. However, even after it became clear that such new immense land mass was something else, the thought that it was somehow connected with Asia would persist stubbornly. This hypothesis was supported by the prevailing Ptolemaic cosmographic conception according to which dry land prevailed over water on the globe's surface, as we know today. Cartographic evidence shows this idea, such as the Reinel planisphere of 1519, prior to Magellan's voyage, in which the unexplored western side of the American continent lacks iconographic representations of ships, normally used to indicate the sea, leaving open the hypothesis that an immense land mass might be extending in connection with Asia. The theory of Amerasian continuity was obviously in support of the Spanish imperial project. According to this conceptualization of space, still after Magellan's crossing,

the Pacific Ocean, although immense, was part of a single geographical system with East Asia, making the immense sea a sort of Spanish lake. This theory can be found in both literary and cartographic sources. For example, the account known under the name of *De Moluccis Insulis*, written in 1523 by Maximilian von Sevenborgen (aka Maximilianus Transylvanus), personal secretary of the Emperor Charles V, could not be more favourable to the feasibility of sailing through the Pacific Ocean (p. 109, e-version).

This report was made collecting the testimonies of the survivors of the first circumnavigation of the world started by the Portuguese Ferdinand Magellan and concluded by the Spanish Juan Sebastián Elcano, and was obviously in favour of the Spanish imperial transpacific project. For doing so, however, Sevenborgen needed to emphasize the successful crossing of the Pacific, despite the political failure of not being able to officially claim the possession of the Moluccan Islands. The emperor's secretary does not lie about the vastness of the Ocean and reports exactly the three months and twenty days voyage that took Magellan to cross it, but he «says absolutely nothing about starvation, thirst, sickness, desperation, loneliness, or mortality along the way» (p. 110, e-version). In conclusion, continues Padrón, Sevenborgen text has as an ultimate goal “to magnify the achievement of the Spanish as navigators, conquerors, and propagators of the faith”, but for doing so he needed to portray the Pacific Ocean as a vast, yet tamable space, a part of a single and consistent political area. Sevenborgen's writing, which is clearly a political text, could not be further from the Report of the First Voyage Around the World (*Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo*), written by Antonio Pigafetta, a companion of Magellan with whom he crossed the Pacific Ocean. Pigafetta gives us a dramatic description of this first crossing, in which the image of the great distance is conveyed to the reader by the emphasis put by the author on the suffering caused by disease and food shortages in almost four months of travel.

Between the two positions, eventually, the imperial one prevailed but not without difficulty. Technological, scientific and even religious factors were not extraneous to this process of political and geographical conceptual construction. The gradual improvement of navigation techniques and better knowledge of the Pacific currents allowed Andrés de Urdaneta to inaugurate the first stable route between America and Asia across the Pacific between 1564 and 1565. The beginning of the process of evangelization of East Asia also contributed to the impetus of the imperial creation of the West Indies. Despite this, as the author points out, from a territorial point of view the Spanish conquests in East Asia did not go beyond the Philippines and the Moluccas, and the metageographic constructions that allowed to organize these territories into a coherent whole with the American colonies, defining them as the Transpacific West instead of the Far East, lasted little more than a century and were not fully shared by all.

In conclusion, Ricardo Padrón's book: *The Indies of the Setting Sun* should be welcomed as a useful and much needed book. Its historiographical importance lies in showing how the cultural and political process (and the entanglements between these spheres) that led to the modern conception of the world did not follow a linear path. From this fact come very useful remarks for the present. Today we know very well how geography, in its cartographic and literary representations, is not a neutral technology, but more than other scientific areas it bends to the needs of global powers. In geography, however, we sometimes tend to imagine the pre-20th century past as a more or less linear process that proceeded from an approximate and idealized representation of the world towards something more and more precise and objective. Ricardo Padrón's book shows us how this process, too, was composed of competing theories and political projects that sought to bend representations of the world to their own needs. I believe that today, in an era of redefinition of the balance between global powers with enormous interests in the Pacific area, this book is of great usefulness and relevance.

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