

Isabella Lazzarini,

Communication and Conflict: Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350-1520

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Isabella Lazzarini offers a new take on the issue of modern diplomacy's emergence in late medieval Europe. Following the basic tenets of new diplomatic history, her account carefully scrutinizes the evolution of diplomatic interactions in Italy through what she calls the long Quattrocento. In her presentation of a multilayered and multifaceted diplomacy, she espouses a revisionist approach against the traditional historiography which sees diplomacy within the grand narrative of modern state's emergence and places its roots firmly in the mid-fifteenth century, taking Florence as its case-study. Criticizing the established historiography's obsession with formality, neglect of social and cultural aspects of diplomacy, and reduction of diplomatic agency to state actors and to the official ambassador, Lazzarini depicts diplomacy as a flexible political activity in which negotiation, information-gathering, representation and communication interacted in accordance with political and cultural transformation of power and authority. Moreover, she offers a more extended time period and a wider geographical and political framework. She accentuates a gradual and far-from-linear process of adaptations and appropriations that took place between 1350 and 1520, thus defying the traditional historiography's focus on a mid-fifteenth century turning-point. Moreover, she covers a wider geography by including Italians' diplomatic interactions with the Christian West and the Levant. Finally, she opposes the historiography's exclusivist tendency to study diplomacy only within the formal framework of authority and power and offers a more nuanced picture in which different political forces, including a myriad of non-state actors, interact in complex patterns of conflict and negotiation.

The work that outlines the processes and developments in diplomacy in its infancy consists of Four Parts, each divided into three chapters. Part I gives a general framework. Chapter One provides a map of diplomatic actors and accentuates the multiple layering of daily negotiations as well as the fluidity of boundaries between diplomacy and politics, or in other words, between international and internal spheres of politics. Moreover, the chapter points to a structural flexibility

that would gradually lessen in the second half of the fifteenth century with the appearance of a hierarchy of polities; a flexibility that refuses another rigid boundary between “formal” and “informal” and considers other actors such as cities, condottieri, rural communities, great prelates, etc. as diplomatic players. Chapter Two draws attention to the multiple origins, polygenesis, of modern diplomacy, a product of the merging of different models and different traditions. She rejects a linear and ubiquitous progression from ad-hoc to permanent diplomacy and criticizes the idea of a diplomatic revolution with an exclusive focus on resident diplomacy, central governments and formal ambassadors. Instead, she proposes a more flexible system which still included informal and traditional forms and developed in interaction with local conditions and specific circumstances. The figure of the ambassador, on which the exigencies of everyday negotiations imposed an inevitable decision-making autonomy as well as a high public status, emerged gradually during the long Quattrocento, in a process of trial and error in which different types of envoys were used for different types of missions. Chapter Three covers the sources under scrutiny, the documents that proliferated as a result of intensified diplomatic activity: first and foremost ambassadorial letters, but also other types of sources, not necessarily issued from the chanceries, such as histories, travel journals, memoirs and treatises.

Part II concentrates on diplomacy as a political action. Chapter Four deals with the issue of information, i.e. news, rumors and speculations which became part-and-parcel of modern diplomacy with the establishment of resident embassies. Continuous diplomatic negotiations required ambassadors to actively engage in gathering, verifying, classifying, distributing and manipulating information while decision-makers and chanceries had to figure out how to deal with a continuous flow of intelligence. Moreover, an emerging mistrust towards the increasingly available news, rumors and speculations created a paradoxical situation in which information fed suspicion rather than assuring decision-makers and thus deepened conflicts rather than solving them. Chapter Five deals with another, and perhaps the most important, aspect of diplomatic interaction: negotiation, a practice which underwent a major change from a highly formalized activity that concluded a conflictual relationship into a series of continuous verbal interactions or “dialogues”. This intensifying of diplomatic exchanges enhanced the scope of negotiations beyond the sphere of high politics, the realm of treaties and alliances; diplomats now had to reason, discuss, analyze and argue in order to deal with more “mundane” issues and take all sorts of private and collective

interests into account. Chapter Six focuses on the development of a complex system of communication networks between diplomatic actors with different status, legitimacy, and power. It analyzes a process whereby a dense web of diplomatic alliances slowly produced a hierarchy of polities in which minor powers were denied access to diplomatic circles that were increasingly dominated by a handful of major powers. This hierarchy was further strengthened by a shared discourse of diplomacy with a specific grammar and a common conceptual framework. These twin development of the emergence of complex communication networks and of a hegemonic group of major powers allowed the containment, if not the resolution, of conflicts through diplomatic negotiations at least until the French descent into Italy in 1494.

Part III investigates diplomacy as a flexible and adaptable practice. Chapter Seven studies the physiognomy of the agents of Renaissance diplomacy: their skills, education, geographical origin, social background, prerogatives, roles and the nature of their actions. The diplomatic “agency” is not limited to official ambassadors, but also extended to “occasional” (the author intentionally evades the term “informal”) diplomats such as clerics, condottieri, artists, scientists, physicians, merchants, bankers and all sort of economic agents and even to aristocratic women whose diplomatic function went at times beyond the maintenance of familial communication networks between dynasties. Chapter Eight scrutinizes the tension in diplomatic interactions between formality and ritual on the one hand and adaptation and improvisation on the other. It moreover adds that the formalization and the ritualization of diplomacy prioritized a visible language of pre-eminence which imposed the afore-mentioned hierarchy of polities by closing the door on several minor powers that could not compete in the game of precedence. Chapter Nine studies several different places in which negotiations took place: capital cities (a novel idea at the time), towns, villages, bathing sites, castles, palaces, squares, streets, rural villas, farms, gardens, hunting grounds, building sites, etc. As diplomatic events became more theatrical, the space attained a political meaning and use. The location and the spatial *mise-en-scène* orchestrated by governments not only conditioned the tenure, style and rules of diplomatic interactions but also strengthened the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that promoted a rigid hierarchy of polities.

Part IV concentrates on the cultural processes tied to the changes in diplomacy and the emergence of an innovative political language of power and domination. Chapter Ten studies the discursive techniques which express, through words

and gestures, a new set of concepts that were increasingly gaining currency in long-Quattrocento diplomacy. Accentuating the intertwined nature of orality and writing, the author makes an important reminder that a dualistic view which prioritizes written over spoken communication or assumes a linear process whereby the former overtakes the other is simply flawed. She then analyzes the diplomats' strategic employment of words and their code-switching between talking, reading, and writing during diplomatic negotiations by scrutinizing each of these communication forms in detail. The sub-chapter on written forms contains an argument of cardinal importance that points to a change in the textual characteristic and the narrative style of diplomatic correspondence. As ambassadors grew more and more autonomous with the regularization and intensification of diplomatic negotiations, they started to develop an attentive eye on human behavior and social interactions and to use a more refined language.

In the most interesting chapter of the book, Lazzarini focuses on another type of code-switching in diplomatic interactions and analyzes the interplay between two discursive strategies that would appear at first sight at the opposite ends of the spectrum: argument and emotions. The author first demonstrates how developments repeated throughout the book –the endless flow of information, varying political circumstances and the continuous nature of diplomatic interactions, created a new language for political reasoning, inspired by Ciceronian rhetoric and employing a tight reasoning strategy to be used in public debate, whether in the internal or in the external sphere, in domestic or diplomatic settings. Concurrently, however, emotions started to appear in diplomatic dispatches more frequently and in a more sophisticated manner; diplomats started to use in refined sentences a larger collection of words that described emotions with a deeper meaning and intentionality, hinting at a new interest in human behavior and actively contributing to the development of an innovative diplomatic language.

The final chapter deals with a number of key elements of diplomatic interaction: languages, lexeis and gift-giving practices. It provides the reader with a linguistic map of European and Mediterranean diplomacy and deals with linguistic mediation through interpreters. Then, it tackles the issue of linguistic discrepancies between diplomats with different cultural origins. The increasing use of technical and cultural lexeis, as if the existence of different languages were not enough to complicate the negotiations between men with different cultural backgrounds, might have created ambiguities that were proven hard to overcome. But they also provided a common background, such as a shared

language like Latin or a common literary genre like poetry, that facilitated negotiations, especially between unequal negotiation partners. The chapter ends with an analysis of gift-giving, an issue long discussed by diplomatic and cultural historians. Casting her nets wider and accepting immaterial goods as gifts as well, Lazzarini shows the multiple functions of strategically conveyed gifts in diplomatic interaction.

Lazzarini's work is about nuances and fine points, depicting a complex picture and challenging simplistic explanations and rigid dichotomies (formal vs. informal, official vs. unofficial, internal vs. international, oral vs. written). It is an essential corrective to the traditional approach to Renaissance diplomacy that relies on an outdated bibliography and a teleological fine-tuning of facts so that they fit into the grand narrative of the birth of resident diplomacy. Over and over she takes issue with a linear understanding of history, one that sees an uninterrupted progress towards a more developed form of diplomacy. Her account is replete with details, pointing out to ruptures, discontinuities and contradictions, natural results of a complex process of trials and errors, conditioned by the contingencies and exigencies of international politics.

A prolific historian (in the bibliography, she includes 38 works of herself, excluding document compilations), Isabella Lazzarini scrutinizes every aspect of Renaissance diplomacy with carefully conveyed arguments that are supported by an impressive array of examples, testifying to her mastery of contemporary sources (after all she edited several of them). Non-experts might get lost among a myriad of states, politicians, soldiers and events cited in several examples throughout the book; moreover long quotations which skillfully nuances the characteristics of Quattrocento diplomacy runs at times the risk of wearing the reader. To make things more complicated, Lazzarini uses a heavy jargon. This is to a certain extent inevitable in a book that revises a well-entrenched historiography; one should not, therefore, assume that Lazzarini is one of those historians who invent complex words to endorse old arguments, adding few to what we already know without offering a fresh image. Her account is revisionist in content and unless you are quickly overwhelmed by massive amount of data and a heavy jargon, it is a very interesting read.

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