CHAPTER 2

Behind the Stage: The Global Dimension of the Negotiations

Lucien Bély

Study of the diplomatic correspondence before the Peace of Utrecht reveals that commercial and colonial interests became very important at that time. The question of the Indies, that is, of Spanish America, may be counted as one the causes of the War of the Spanish Succession. So European diplomats had to understand and discuss such matters, but most of the negotiators, gentlemen or clergymen, were unfamiliar with these issues. Merchants could intervene in the discussions as experts and sometimes as negotiators as did, for instance, the French merchant and diplomat Nicolas Mesnager, deputy of Rouen for the council of commerce. Such interventions often formed the most secret part of the negotiations.

We can note a dialectical phenomenon. The merchants wanted to discover new markets, and the European economies needed them in a time of general crisis. On the other hand, governments and diplomats integrated those views into their demands and tried to imagine new ways to intervene throughout the world and to open new roads for commerce.

Of course, the dynastic situation was the main affair in the War of the Spanish Succession. The House of Bourbon was seeking a new relationship between the Court of Versailles and the Court of Madrid that would create a real union between them. The young Philip V, Louis XIV’s grand-son, was expected to follow the king of France’s political line. On the other side, the allies—Great Britain, the United Provinces and the emperor—could not accept this new European organization with such a huge aggregation of crowns in the hands of one family. This super-power would pose a threat to the stability of all of Europe. The war’s military operations were the main concern of the European princes: they were waiting for the result of their strategic choices. For thirteen years, the battles dominated European history. But some other interests, particularly commercial ones, soon became factors in the negotiations among allies or between enemies as the hidden part of the conflict.
The Global Dimension Of The Negotiations

The Negotiations between France and Spain

One of the key issues in international relations of the time involved the participation of foreigners in Spanish-American trade, despite Spain's colonial monopoly. European merchants brought to Spain the products needed for this trade, but the trade remained in Spanish hands, was controlled by Spanish officers and protected by the Spanish fleet. A 1686 investigation by the French consul Patoulet showed the place of each country in the trade of Cadiz: France ranked first; Genoa, the United Provinces, England, Hamburg, and the Spanish Netherlands each had a good share while Spain provided only 6% of the goods.¹

We know that the arrival of precious metals also had important consequences for European economies. The study, in particular, of the place of precious metals and of metallic coinage in the development of Europe has been controversial for historians and perhaps for economists. The ‘crisis’ of the seventeenth century was described by Earl J. Hamilton,² reinterpreted by P. Chaunu³ and discussed by Michel Morineau.⁴ During the War of the Spanish Succession, Mesnager wrote that New World treasure was almost the sole source of the wealth of Europe.⁵ And in 1710, he wrote: ‘Spanish America has

¹ The foreigners themselves were present in the Spanish ports, as the Flemish in Cadiz: Jan Everaert, *De internationale en koloniale Handel der Vlaamse Firma’s te Cadiz (1670–1700)* (Bruges: De Tempel, 1973); or the Irish present in the Canary Islands: Agustin Guimerá Ravina and José Miguel Delgado Barrado, ‘Proyectismo camario y comercio americano: un plan de compañía privilegiada (1753),’ *El Comercio en el Antiguo Régimen*, ed. Manuel Lobo Cabrera and Vicente Suárez Grimón (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1994), 151–162.