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The Birth of 'United America' – A Diplomatic Challenge for Ruđer Bošković

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America was a manysided and continuous challenge for Bošković. In his Roman period it posed a geodesic challenge¹ because of the idea to travel to Brazil and measure the degree of the meridian close to the equator at the expense of the Portuguese king. In his Milan period it posed an astronomical challenge² because of his intention to observe the transit of Venus on the Californian coast. In his third, Parisian period America became the object of his political consideration and poetic inspiration.

Bošković began to observe North America from a distinctly political perspective already in 1768, five years before his arrival in Paris. He communicated the first bunch of such news and comments in his letters to his family in Dubrovnik³ and not, as one would expect, to the Senate of his homeland, the Dubrovnik Republic. The troubles which the British faced in the American North, wrote Bošković on 19 August 1768, prevented the official declaration of war between France and England. On 16 May 1770 he sent his brother news about the Boston massacre.

The French subject and his »first, natural homeland«

The status of the famous Ragusan radically changed soon after his arrival in Paris. Having duly paid the administrative fee of deux cent quarante livres Bošković became a French citizen on 9 December 1773. The document describes him as »our dear and good friend Ruđer Bošković from the City of Dubrovnik in

1 Ivica Martinović, »America – A Challenge for Ruđer Bošković the Surveyor«, *Anali Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku*, 35, 1997, pp. 173.184.

2 See the collection of letters relating to the never realized journey to California kept in the Archivum Historicum SI Roma, Opera Nostrorum 90, ff. 1r–54v, published under nos. 178–206 in »Ruggiero Giuseppe Boscovich, Carteggio con corrispondenti diversi su un'ipotesi di viaggio in California (1776–1767)«, and in »Ruggiero Giuseppe Boscovich, Lettere per una storia della scienza (1763–1786)«, a cura di Rita Tolomeo (Rome: Accademia Nazionale delle scienze detta dei XL, 1991), pp. 281–326. Cf. in particular the letter of Lord Morton to Ruđer Bošković, then in Pavia, London, 12 May 1767, kept at the Archivum Historicum SI Roma, Opera Nostrorum 90, ff. 44r–45v, published in »Boscovich, Carteggio con corrispondenti diversi su un'ipotesi di viaggio in California (1776–1767)«, pp. 320–321.

3 See Željko Marković, *Ruđer Bošković, Part Two* (Zagreb, JAZU, 1969), p. 755, 760 and 831.

Dalmatia, priest of the abolished Society of Jesus, descendant of an old Dalmatian family and nobleman of the Republic of Lucca« (notre cher et bien aimé Roger Boscovich de la ville Raguse en Dalmatie, pretre de la Societé de Jésus abolie, issue d'une ancienne famille de Dalmatia et Noble de la République de Lucques)¹. The appointment to the post of Director of Naval Optics of the French Navy and membership in the Académie, which remained an unfulfilled promise, required French citizenship. In his letter dated 8 February 1774, he informed the Ragusan Senate about these two reasons which led him to seek French citizenship (la naturalizzazione). Even in the new circumstances Bošković confirmed his patriotism:

»Although I have now become a Frenchman, and even receive a pension from His Majesty and have been appointed his civil servant, I will always bear in mind my first, natural homeland.«²

He significantly signed his letter »Servitore, e Sud: dit0«, i.e., as he signed his correspondence when he was truly, in formal and legal terms, a subject of the Dubrovnik Republic.

On 6 March 1774, when he received the Brevet appointing him Director of Naval Optics (Direttore d'Optica per la Marina), Bošković hastened to inform the Senate of the Dubrovnik Republic that the Minister of the Navy, after a long delay caused by certain envious persons, had kindly handed him a letter with the Royal Brevet on appointment to Director of Optics in order to »attend to that kind of mathematics, and perfect theory and in a particular way to facilitate the use of achromatic binoculars required by the Navy for its observers and warships«.³ Another document, a brevet of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, established the amount of yearly emoluments so that Bošković could fully devote his efforts to »sublime meditation and to his zeal to advance science« (alle meditazioni sublimi, e al mio zelo per l'avanzamento delle scienze). The Ministry of the Navy contracted to pay him 2,000 francs a year, along with a 2,000 franc reward, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs set his emoluments at 4,000 francs a year. The letter dated 7 March 1774 was the first letter signed by Bošković in his new capacity of Director of Optics of the French Navy:

Um: m^o Div: m^o Obbl: m^o Ser: vitor^e
l'Abbate Boscovich Direttore d'Optica
per la Marina di S.M. Cristianissima

1 Cf. the document *Naturalité avec Congé de tenir Bénéfice en faveur du S. Roger Boscovich* signed by Louis XV on the admission of Ruđer Bošković to French citizenship, DHA (Dubrovnik Historical Archives), Acta et diplomata, 18th c., RB-1. See also the description of the document: Ivica Martinović, »Philosophical, Scientific, Literary and Research Work of Ruđer Bošković and a Contribution to His Biography« in *Isusovačka baština u Hrvata* (Zagreb, MCG, 1992), pp. 275–289, 276–277.

2 Letter of Ruđer Bošković to the Senate of the Dubrovnik Republic, Paris, 8 February 1774. The autograph is kept in DHA, Acta Sanctae Mariae Maioris: 18th c. Correspondence, F. XIII, N. 1697. Letter published in: Giuseppe Gelcich, »Bošković's Letters to the Dubrovnik Republic/Lettere dell'A. R.G. Boscovich alla Repubblica di Ragusa«, *Rad JAZU* 87–88–90 (1887–1888), pp. 177–180, 179–180: »Quantunque ora divenuto Francese, e già pensionato di S.M. Cristianissima, e destinato suo ufficiale, avrò sempre in vista la prima mia patria naturale.«

3 Letter of Ruđer Bošković to the Senate of the Dubrovnik Republic, Paris, 7 March 1774; autograph kept in: DHA, Acta Sanctae Mariae Maioris, 18th c. Correspondence, F. XIII, N. 1667. Published in: Gelcich, *Bošković's Letters to the Dubrovnik Republic*, pp. 180–182.

A political challenge: the birth of a new republic

After less than a year spent in Paris, Bošković's understanding of the nature of political events in North America developed into clear insights. As he wrote to his brother Božo on 10 October 1774, »a new republic is being born in America, similar to the one in the Netherlands, at the general congress of all the colonies on the continent which will probably conclude an alliance and provide for the assurance of their freedom.«¹ In his letter dated 12 December 1774, he also noted the response of the colonial power: in his address to Parliament the British king announced the use of all means in an effort to subjugate the Americans.

In his diplomatic letters regularly sent from Paris to the Senate of the Dubrovnik Republic, Bošković began to discuss American topics only in 1778. For the Ragusan patriciate he summed up the news which he had collected in Parisian diplomatic circles by 17 October 1778 in the following words: »in America the British have lost very much.«² According to the same sources, wrote Bošković, the taking of Rhode Island (la presa di Rod Island) was imminent, because the 6000 troops available to the British could not withstand the combined attack of the French fleet under d'Estaing's command from the sea and the American forces from land. In spite of such forecasts, the British stood their ground.

Late in the same year Bošković met in Versailles with Benjamin Franklin, »representative of United America« (deputato dell'America Unita) at the French court, whom he had met during his stay in London in 1760.³ This time they did not discuss experiments with electricity. The meeting took place at a lunch given in Versailles by Comte de Vergennes, the French Foreign Minister.⁴ In keeping with his diplomatic role Franklin was restrained: »I asked him whether there was interesting news, which could be communicated, and he replied that there was none.« Bošković persisted in his questions. He asked Franklin about the actual position of the French fleet under admiral d'Estaing, and, even more directly, whether it was true, as rumoured in Paris, that it had been surrounded in the Boston harbour.

1 Ruder Bošković to Božo Bošković, Paris, 10 October 1774. Letter kept at University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Boscovich Archives 587, p7, 180; copy by Branimir Truhelka at Zavod za povijest i filozofiju znanosti HAZU u Zagrebu: »Gli Inglesi hanno troppi guai in America, dove va a nascere una nuova Repubblica simile a quella d'Olanda, nel Congresso generale di tutte le Colonie del Continente, che faranno probabilmente in esso una lega con de' provvedimenti di assicurare la sua libertà.« See information on custody in: Edoardo Proverbio, Provisional catalogue of R.J. Boscovich's letters, p. 137b. Cf. Željko Marković, Ruder Bošković, p. 831.

2 Ruder Bošković to the Senate of the Dubrovnik Republic, Bignon, 17 October 1778. Letter kept at DHA, Acta Sanctae Mariae Maioris: 18th c. Correspondence, F. XV, No. 1879; published in: Gelcich, Bošković's Letters to the Dubrovnik Republic, pp. 223–225.

3 On the meetings between Ruder Bošković and Benjamin Franklin see: Željko Marković, Ruder Bošković (Zagreb, JAZU, 1968–1969), p. 540, 546, 564 and 882; Dragoljub Živojinović, The American Revolution and the Dubrovnik Republic 1763–1790 (Belgrade, Prosveta, 1976), p. 136 and 142; Vladimir Muljević, »Some of Bošković's views on aerostats and his contacts with Benjamin Franklin«, in Žarko Dadić, ed., Proceedings of the International Symposium on Ruder Bošković (Zagreb, JAZU, 1991), pp. 145–151, 146–148.

4 Ruder Bošković to the Senate of the Dubrovnik Republic, Paris, 7 December 1778; autograph kept at DHA, Acta Sanctae Mariae Maioris: 18th c. Correspondence, F. XV, N. 1883; letter published in: Gelcich, Bošković's Letters to the Dubrovnik Republic, pp. 225–227: »Dir solo che ieri l'altro a Versaigles mi trovai a pranzare dal Sig. Conte di Vergennes col celebre Dottor Franklin deputato dell'America Unita, che è di mia antica conoscenza.« Cf. Marković, Ruder Bošković, p. 882.

»He assured me that d'Estaing was at sea, as confirmed to me by another reliable person.« Bošković relied on the testimony of a captain who had personally seen, on his return journey to French ports, the admiral's flagship and the entire squadron at sea. The efficiency of the French sea support for the Americans was crucial for the outcome of the British-American conflict, and stimulating not only for Bošković the diplomat but also for Bošković the poet.

Before leaving for Bassano, where he was to print his *Opera pertinentia ad opticam et astronomiam*, Bošković reported in three letters to the Dubrovnik Senate the military and political news on the course of the British-French war in the West Indies.¹ Among the information which he conveyed on 12 March, the most important and latest was the 5 March petition of the British Parliament to the King, requesting »the cessation of the American war« (*la cessazione della guerra d'America*)², celebrated the same evening by fireworks in the British capital. In another letter dated 2 April, written in addition to his regular monthly report to the Ragusan patriciate, Bošković reported the varying fortunes of war in the fight for the island of St. Christopher in the Lesser Antilles; Bošković's reliable source on war developments was the son of Marquis Mirabeau who had just arrived from the island. Bošković's last diplomatic letter sent from Paris, dated 30 April 1782, drew the attention of the Ragusan Senate to the »complete change of government in London, »that is, to the appointment of a new government which immediately took steps to conclude peace, or at least a truce, with the Netherlands and North America. In line with the new balance of forces, diplomatic developments gained a new momentum. »The Netherlands has already recognized the independence of America and received the minister of the new republic«³ reported Bošković to the Ragusans. The most favourable news, *una nuova favorevolissima* as Bošković explicitly put it in writing, related to the steady bearing of the new political subject: »It is certain that the Americans will also firmly hold their ground.«⁴ To this political news Bošković added information on a major success of two large French merchant convoys, which sailed out of Santo Domingo and Brest and crossed the Atlantic with no mishap. The authorities of the small maritime city-state certainly carefully watched the news on new navigational circumstances in the Atlantic. However, Bošković's last diplomatic letter from Paris gave precedence to political news over trade. Bošković called the attention of his homeland to the fact that a new independent subject had appeared on the scene, with its own interests and motives – United America.

1 Letters of Ruđer Bošković to the Senate of the Dubrovnik Republic, Paris, 12 March, 2 April and 30 April 1782, kept at: DHA, *Acta Sanctae Mariae Maioris*, 18th c. Correspondence, F. XV, NN. 1951, 1952 and 1957; published as letters 85, 86 and 87 in: Gelcich: Bošković's Letters to the Dubrovnik Republic, pp. 238–243.

2 Gelcich, Bošković's Letters to the Dubrovnik Republic, p. 239.

3 Ruđer Bošković to the Senate of the Dubrovnik Republic, Paris, 30 April 1782, letter kept at DHA, *Acta Sanctae Mariae Maioris*: 18th c. Correspondence, F. XV, N. 1957; published in: Gelcich, Bošković's Letters to the Dubrovnik Republic, pp. 241–243, 242: »ma già la Olanda, cioè tutti gli stati generali, ha riconosciuto l'indipendenza degli Americani, e ammesso il ministro di quella nuova Repubblica.«

4 Gelcich: Bošković's Letters to the Dubrovnik Republic, p. 242: »E' cosa sicura, che anche gli Americani terranno sodo.«

A poetic challenge: free Philadelphia

Bošković also devoted verse to the appearance and ascent of United America (Fig. 1). In the poetic dedication to Louis XVI of France, which prefaced the fourth Latin-French edition of his poem *De Solis ac Lunae defectibus*¹, Bošković described in verse the withdrawal of the British from Philadelphia and the freedom won by the American people. In accordance with the canons of the dedication, Bošković thanked the King for his naturalization, income and position in the French Navy, although the documents on Bošković's appointment and yearly income had already been signed by his predecessor Louis XV on 1 January 1774; Bošković had become a French subject even earlier, on 9 December 1773.² Moreover, Bošković dared predict, in the manner of a court astrologer and on the basis of the position of Jupiter and Uranus, that the Queen would bear an heir to the French people at her next birth.

*Qua sese arcloas (ς) America extendit ad oras
In bellum pulchra pro libertate ruebant
Oppressi nuper Populi : tu in vota vocatus
Accurris : iussa immenso volat æquore classis*

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É P I T R E

*Fæta armis, & fæta viris : Philadelphia gaudet
Libera : præcipiti turmæ fugere volatu
Hostiles : liber jam Delavarius amnis
Panditur, atque suos dominam deducit ad Urbem,
Imperiique novi surgit tutissima moles.*

Figure 1. Bošković's verse written on the eve of American freedom: »Philadelphia gaudet libera.« Boscovich, »Ad potentissimum Galliae regem Ludovicum XVI epistola dedicatoria,« in *Les éclipses* (Paris, 1779), excerpts from pp. VI and VIII.

1 Abbé Boscovich, »Ad potentissimum Galliae regem Ludovicum XVI epistola dedicatoria/éptre dédicatoire a Sa Majesté Louis XVI Roi de France«, in Boscovich, *Les éclipses* (Paris: Chez Valade – Laporte, 1779), pp. I–XXVII.

2 Cf. Ivica Martinović, »The Life and Work of Ruder Bošković«, *Dubrovački horizonti*, 35, 1995, pp. 41–48, 48.

At first sight, Bošković's verses on America's freedom respect both the framework of Realpolitik and the canons of a poem dedicated to the ruler. They immediately remind the reader of the crucial military fact, i.e., of the protection offered by the French fleet under admiral d'Estaing to the narrow coastal belt of the North American continent, which forced the British to withdraw from Philadelphia and the Delaware basin.

On the other hand, in terms of detail, Bošković's dedication departs from the rules of the genre and transcends the Realpolitik framework with its manyfaced statement of liberty:

*Qua sese arctoas America extendit ad oras
In bellum pulchra pro libertate ruebant
Oppressi nuper Populi: tu in vota vocatus
Accurris: jussa immenso volat aequore classis
Foeta armis, & foeta viris: Philadelphia gaudet
Libera: praecipiti turmae fugere volatu
Hostiles: liber jam Delavarius amnis
Panditur, atque suos dominam deducit ad Urbem,
Imperiique novi surgit tutissima moles.*

*(Where America reaches its narrow seaboard,
The oppressed people rose to fight for beautiful freedom.
You rush to help, oh King, prompted by their desire,
And on your order the ships haste across the infinite sea.
They are laden with arms, they are laden with men.
Free rejoices Philadelphia. Suspecting failure
The evil-doing troops withdraw. Free flows the river
Of Delaware to its capital city.
The building truly rises of a new empire.)¹*

In extolling America's freedom, Bošković extolled the decision whereby the oppressed American people »rose to fight for beautiful freedom« (in bellum pulchra pro libertate), but also stated a political estimate about the safe foundations of a new empire, an estimate which today sounds like a prophecy: »The building truly rises of a new empire.«

Certainly, it was not advisable to sing praises to a new empire in a poem dedicated to a monarch ruling an old empire. Augustin de Barruel, who published his own prose translation of Bošković's verse into French alongside the Latin original, added a historical note to these introductory lines.² De Barruel took pains to make Bošković's messages more acceptable to the French court, and added, in the final verse on the American episode, the 'auspices' of the French King:

1 Boscovich, »Ad potentissimum Galliae regem Ludovicum XVI epistola dedicatoria«, pp. vi-viii.

2 Cf. note 5 by the translator De Barruel in: Les éclipses, pome en six chants, dédié a Sa Majesté par M. L'Abbé Boscovich, traduit en Franais par M. L'Abbé Barruel (Paris, Chez Valade, Imprimeur-Libraire; Laporte, Libraire, 1779), P. VII: »Protection accordée aux Américains, départ de la flotte de M. d'Estaing, dont l'approche a déterminé les Anglois à évacuer Philadelphie & la Délavare.«

»E ce nouvel empire s'élève sous tes auspices.«¹

Bošković's joy over American freedom is mostly condensed in his unforgettable poetic statement addressed to America's first capital:

»Free rejoices Philadelphia« (Philadelphia gaudet libera)

Even here Barruel tried to be clearer in order to suit the French court when he called those who look to Philadelphia »children of Penn.«²

Although the episode on American freedom was reduced to nine hexameters. Bošković mentioned it regularly in his letters written to various people in the summer of 1779, i.e., in the period when he weekly received from his printers five signatures of the new edition of his natural science poem. Thus, in two letters written to Francesco Gambarani, professor of physics in Milan, he enumerated the topics of his poem dedicated to the king, and noted that an important theme of his hexameters was also l'America settentrionale protetta³, i.e., North America which enjoyed the support of the French king in opposing Britain. The American theme, explained Bošković, followed up the verse on the modernized and strengthened French Navy in whose service he also happened to be. Indeed, between the lines of the letter to Gambarani of 10 July 1779 there are verses precisely on the advancement of the Navy and on free Philadelphia. Bošković included the same verses, with a similar explanation, in his letter of 24 July 1779 addressed to his young devotee and fellow monk Francesco Puccinelli.⁴

Today we can easily agree with Bošković from the distance of two centuries. It was truly fitting to rejoice in the freedom of a distant people, and in the safe foundations of its newly established state. A Croatian thinker moving in Parisian diplomatic circles judged with an enviable clarity the appearance of a »new republic« in the North American continent, and informed his »first, natural homeland« about it in 1778–1782. A Croatian poet welcomed the dawn of American freedom two centuries ago.

Translated by: Vladimir Ivir & Janko Paravić

1 Boscovich, »épitre dedicatoire a Sa Majesté Roi de France«, p. vii.

2 Boscovich, »épitre dedicatoire a Sa Majesté Roi de France«, p. vii: les Enfants de Penn.

3 Ruđer Bošković to Francesco Gambarani in Milan, Paris, 13 June and 10 July 1779; letters 142 and 143 published in Franjo Rački, ed., »Bošković's Letters to Various Persons«, Rad JAZU 87–88–90, 1887–1888, pp. 321–325, 322, 323.

4 Ruđer Bošković to Francesco Puccinelli, Boynes, 24 July 1779; kept at: Archivum Historicum SI Roma, Opera Notorum 89, ff. 68r–69r. Published in: Boscovich, Lettere per una storia della scienza, pp. 138–140, 139.