Introduction
Mercenaries of Knowledge in a “Century of Improvisation”

“A countryman’s care placed me, a nut tree, at this cross-roads, where I am the butt of stone-throwing boys. I have grown tall, but my branches are broken, my bark bruised, I am attacked with sling-stones, competing on every side. What worse fate could befall a barren tree? Alas, cursed tree that I am, I bear fruit to my own destruction.”

Nogueira or the walnut tree...
Alciato, Emblems (1577), Emblema n. CXCII, p. 623.

Renaissance conflicts gave way to a century of improvisation.¹ In the conventional story connecting the rise of modern states to the development of a public sphere of opinion, this period is framed as an interlude between the ambivalent collaborations of sixteenth-century humanists with structures of governance, and eventually, the growing intervention and theorization of eighteenth-century philosophes. These useful terms – humanists and philosophes – lend coherence to a history of ideas conditioned by the overarching argument of the advent of modern states and civic societies. Indeed, when reflecting on the trajectories of seventeenth-century men and women of letters, historians often add an adjective or a prefix (i.e. late humanists or pre-enlightened thinkers) which connects such figures to this argument.² These modifiers do not, however, fully capture the intellectual and political fragmentation of seventeenth-century cultures of knowledge nor the overlapping history of intellectual networks and diplomacy. This book reflects on the meaning of such fragmentation and connection from the perspective of individuals who contributed to formal and informal intellectual and political exchanges

¹ On the seventeenth century as “the century of improvisation” see Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat*, p. 23.
² For a discussion of the autonomy of the early modern literary and intellectual field see Jouhaud, *Les pouvoirs de la littérature* and Schneider, *Dignified Retreat*, pp. 18–21. On how a new model of intellectual commitment with state administrations started but was not yet empowered during the Baroque period see Tessier, *Réseaux diplomatiques et républiques des lettres* and Fumaroli, *Republic of Letters*, chapter 8.
by moving, gathering, accumulating, tracing, and transforming information contained in news, letters, books, manuscripts, libraries, and archives. Through their activities, these individuals fostered the conversion of that disparate information into politically useful knowledge.

Considering a social history of knowledge written from the perspective of men and women who were neither full-fledged humanists nor self-proclaimed emancipated philosophes forces scholars to reconsider the political history of the early modern period. To describe the diverse trajectories of such individuals, the term mercenary becomes apt. After all, these seventeenth-century men and women of letters did not remain neutral in the face of a world at war. At the same time, their educations and experiences ensured that their contributions to conflict were often scholarly and literary rather than on the battlefields, though still from positions of professional or personal insecurity. Mercenaries of knowledge were men and women of letters who contributed to the mediation of information and ideas from positions of intellectual and political marginality. Like other men and women of letters from this same period (e.g. erudite libertines), mercenaries of knowledge were often characterized as such by their enemies. The line between service and survival (political and religious) during those rough times and when dealing with unfaithful patrons was thin. Being a mercenary often corresponded to a phase in one’s life. This phase could be repeated as often as tensions and displacements pushed such men and women to the fringes of societies. Being a mercenary of knowledge consisted in redeploying the same tactics that these men and women once used in favor of their former masters on behalf of new ones. Their marginality was as much a social construct and a mechanism of oppression imposed on them by their adversaries, as a tool of self-representation that allowed them to react against the pejorative use of the term and make a place for themselves within an international community of knowledge. In addition to the defense of ideals such as toleration, this community fostered intellectual and political communications during a time when other forms of diplomacy were more difficult to sustain.

Like Robert Damien’s “librarian-travelers,” mercenaries of knowledge were interested in the art of political bibliography (i.e. the distribution, reorganization, and destruction of information contained in books, and political communication). The figure of the military entrepreneur is a good example of how during the Late Renaissance boundaries between scholarly, diplomatic, and military practices became blurrier than ever. See Sutherland, The Rise of the Military Entrepreneur and “War, Mobility, and Letters,” 272–92; and “Warfare, Entrepreneurship,” 302–18.

On the relationships between the Republic of Letters and war during the seventeenth century see Ultée, “Res Publica Litteraria and War,” 535–46. The figure of the military entrepreneur is a good example of how during the Late Renaissance boundaries between scholarly, diplomatic, and military practices became blurrier than ever. See Sutherland, The Rise of the Military Entrepreneur and “War, Mobility, and Letters,” 272–92; and “Warfare, Entrepreneurship,” 302–18.
manuscripts, libraries, and archives and any other materials or spaces that interacted with such materials and institutions). They generated a *habitus* situated between humanistic practices and bureaucratic procedures of bibliographical criticism and organization. Though they shared common traits and experiences, mercenaries of knowledge did not form a coherent socio-professional body nor a uniform intellectual community from which a single paradigmatic model can be extrapolated to make sense of the lives of men and women involved in seventeenth-century political and intellectual exchanges. What they shared were experiences of precarity which caused them to convert intellectual resources into a political arsenal, in a context in which such arsenals were in high demand. To secure their own survival, mercenaries of knowledge learned to deal in scholarly and material resources that were looted, sold, exchanged, relocated, disaggregated, stolen, repackaged, and reused during local and global conflicts.

While some mercenaries of knowledge took part in the transformation of knowledge into cultural and political power, not all men and women of letters became mercenaries of knowledge. What gave some coherence to mercenaries of knowledge as a group, in addition to their fights for survival, was their criticism of political abuses and their defense of political tolerance. Such criticism was often based on personal experiences of those abuses or an absence of that tolerance. Their attitudes toward abuse and tolerance affected how these agents reorganized, read, or displayed scholarly materials. Thus, mercenaries of knowledge helped bridge the culture of doubt inherited from sixteenth-century religious conflicts with seventeenth-century desires for political reforms. They made sure that the materials that inspired either doubt or reform could be mapped and manipulated by powerful patrons, making them accessible to anyone who could pay their price for them. In their hands, books, manuscripts, archives, and libraries became proxies for the discussions underpinning political negotiations, often on behalf of parties that would otherwise not have been able or willing to enter into contact with one another.

In addition to the intellectual and political consequences, mercenary accumulations contributed to the commodification of bibliographic resources across the Republic of Letters. Through the inventorying of

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4 Such a figure is best embodied by the book hunter and *libértin*, Gabriel Naudé (1600–1653). Damien, *Bibliothèque et état*, p. 20.

5 “The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification of these practices.” Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 170. For the Spanish context see Brendecke and Martín Romera, “El habitus del oficial real,” 23–51.
bibilographic collections, the making of lists, the exchange of manuscripts, and epistolary conversations about how best to build a library and use it for political purposes, mercenaries of knowledge reinforced the commercial dimension of material exchanges channeled through the Republic of Letters. The networks of this Republic were not exclusively intellectual. In practice, and especially during conflicts, mercenaries deployed their resources across a broader ensemble of political, diplomatic, diasporic, and economic relations. Though an international and ideal community of individuals interested in forging friendships and sharing knowledge via polite conversations, the Republic of Letters also functioned as a decentralized information marketplace within which political forces could access resources that could be transformed – or not – by hired pens into political assets and/or propaganda.

More than just a metaphor that amplifies the roles and practices that mercenaries of knowledge adopted during seventeenth-century wars, the term (i.e. mercenary) is apt because it was used by mercenaries of knowledge themselves. It was not necessarily a compliment. Mercenaries of knowledge had many competitors. They thus often referred to other mercenaries as such when having to discredit competitors across political and religious divides. For example, the Scottish exile and Arabic translator newly converted to Catholicism, David Colville, complained about “mercenaries” who were performing grubby exchanges of books and library inventories. Colville criticized the “Italian Princes” who ordered or promoted books and inventories gathered and compiled by improvised bibliographical experts. Colville doubled down on his critiques when denouncing the “vile mercenaries” who communicated bibliographic materials to “heretics in England” for a few “hundred scudi.”

As an experienced librarian, he proposed himself to those same potential patrons as an expert who could reform those grubby exchanges of books into something of greater political, moral, and intellectual significance. Through so doing, he hoped to gain a more established position. After spending years inventorying and translating manuscripts at the royal library of the Escorial in Spain, Colville hoped to work with the collections of the Duke of Savoy in Turin, or as a librarian at the Vatican. To do so, he needed to distinguish himself from the mercenary profiles he described to his correspondent, Cassiano dal Pozzo, who, at the time, was an influential patron of the arts in charge of recruiting

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6 Khachig, “Rethinking Diaspora(s),” 3–36. On the diasporic circulation of knowledge see Pirillo, The Refugee-Diplomat; Domínguez, Radicals in Exile; and Terspra, Religious Refugees.

7 Colville to Dal Pozzo?, Turin–Rome?, August 16, 1628?, BANLC, Pozzo IV, f. 9r.
mercenaries of knowledge on behalf of Pope Urban VIII (r. 1623–1644) and the latter’s family in Rome. Colville’s portrait of mercenaries of knowledge and strategies of self-promotion transcend simple jealousies among self-proclaimed bibliographical experts across religious divides. It reveals the existence of an eclectic contingent of men of letters on the make who, amid conflicts such as the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), managed bibliographical materials in fraught contexts. Colville’s allusion to transconfessional intellectual and political exchanges was an attempt to delineate the existence of distinct groups among mercenaries of knowledge, publicizing the fact that he belonged to a group committed with the ideological projects underpinning the Catholic Reformation.

This group came of age when the association between the *Respublica Literaria* and *Christiana*, with the city of Rome at its center, started to crumble, and thus sought to reenergize the Republic with new ironic ideals. Men like Colville thought that mercenaries of knowledge proceeding from Iberian territories could best advance such a project because they were ideally positioned to perform triangular communications between the Italian and Iberian peninsulas, and third parties across the European balance of power. Those men and women of letters had access to a global laboratory of empirical information, and this was especially true during the Iberian Union, when the crowns of Spain and Portugal were placed on one king’s head (c. 1580–c. 1640). In addition, the hegemonic power of Spain was contested as the conflicts around the Thirty Years’ War took off, and thus Iberian information was highly desirable to Spanish allies and rivals. The unceasing backdrop of war during the seventeenth century shaped the practices and discourses of men and women of letters and their patrons with an emphasis on the contingency of mercenary activities.

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9 Mercenaries of Knowledge follows historian Sergio Bertelli’s call for a history of rebels or “slightly skeptical” men of letters, through the trajectories of individuals connected with Iberian cultures of knowledge. See Morel-Fatio, “Vicente Noguera,” 37–8 and Bertelli, *Rebeldes, iberinos y ortodoxos*. On the transnational dimension of Baroque intellectual cultures in Italy see Boutier, Marin, and Romano (eds.), *Naples, Rome, Florence*, pp. 172–242 and Bianchi, *Rinascimento e libertinismo*. Filippo de Vivo reported that during the 1630s, the Spanish ambassador in Venice was aware that “sometimes one can learn more about French business in Spain by means of the ambassador based in Venice, or Rome, than by means of the ambassador in Paris.” Vivo, *Information*, p. 75.
11 For effects of war on early modern knowledge exchanges, see Bret et al., “Sciences et empires,” 121–46.
took part in competing reform programs that altogether aimed to rethink how erudition, politics, religion, and culture should intersect.12

In the polycentric and polyglot context of seventeenth-century empires and reforms, mercenaries of knowledge conceived of and advertised themselves as fixers, who were “resourceful, problem-solving guides with a sophisticated grasp of local languages, cultures, and customs.”13 They dealt with contradictory personal emotions and political uncertainties through the arts of political bibliography and historical thinking, a kind of “bibliopolitics.”14 The circulation and selling of bibliographical materials for the sake of international political communication and individual survival allowed mercenaries of knowledge to mediate ideas via the nascent sphere of public opinion connected to the information societies they were helping build. Filippo de Vivo’s ongoing research into Thomas Hobbes’ early career as a secretary of the English embassy in Venice, for example, shows that the philosopher was above all an information engineer who worked on securing his survival and international political communication across powers via bibliopolitics.15 Meanwhile, Harold Cook’s study of the “young Descartes” reveals the impact that conflicts and exile had on the acquisition of practical knowledge and the forging of philosophical ideas during this same period.16 These two philosophers’ early careers resemble nothing so much as that of a mercenary of knowledge.

Mercenaries of Knowledge engages with this and other innovative research that from the perspective of the history of science, ideas, and politics offers a new approach to paradigmatic figures, including the painter-diplomats, Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and Diego Velázquez (1599–1642), or the courtier-astronomer, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), among others, whose careers intersected with those of mercenaries of knowledge.17 Common among these trajectories was the...
pull of Rome as the nominal arbiter among Catholic powers and the main pole of Catholic scholarship. On the other hand, contact and connection with Protestant politics and scholarship was common. From a Roman and papal perspective, the broader Republic of Letters was perceived as a land of mission that needed to be reconquered.\textsuperscript{18} Mercenaries were thus asked to convert and commit with the defense of the Catholic Church. During the 1620s and the 1650s, many of them were recruited by Church officials while in exile. In March 1647, Lucas Holstenius, a German scholar and convert to Catholicism, who had been recruited as a librarian by Cardinal Francesco Barberini in Paris two decades earlier, asked this same cardinal to employ Thomas Vane, an English nobleman who had converted to Catholicism after his reading of the Fathers of the Church.\textsuperscript{19} Holstenius communicated to Francesco Barberini that Vane had written about his and others English dissidents’ experiences when denouncing the hypocrisy of the Anglican Church. Self-reflective and autobiographical compositions were something that mercenaries of knowledge were keen to produce and publicize. Vane’s works had been printed in Paris in French and English. Holstenius suggested that the Congregation for the Propaganda Fide, the main organ in charge of promoting Roman universalistic missionary projects since the early 1620s, should promote Vane’s writings and translate them into Latin.\textsuperscript{20} The city of Rome provided a platform from where mercenaries of knowledge could keep in touch with international politics, including the ones connected to the places they were coming from and from which they had been excluded and were keen to criticize.

Whether Protestant or Catholic, or from any other religious background, mercenaries of knowledge belonged to a generation that came of age around the Thirty Years’ War. The history of how they worked and thought about their position in the world as well as their self-fashioning strategies reveals the murky realities of informal diplomacy and intellectual exchanges during conflicts. This was a generation which had been educated in a relative climate of peace (c. 1600–1618) and internationalism. When conflicts made their comeback, their political views did not match those of other men of letters and politicians who espoused inward-looking reforms, protectionism, centralization projects, and campaigns of reputation promoting bellicose attitudes against foreign enemies.

\textsuperscript{18} Fosi, \textit{Convertire lo straniero}.
\textsuperscript{19} Holstenius to Francesco Barberini, Rome–Paris, March 4, 1647, BV, Allacci, XCVI.
\textsuperscript{20} Holstenius reported that, in addition, Vane, like other mercenaries, was looking for a room to stay in Rome. The Palazzo de la Cancelleria was one possible destination. Other mercenaries were residing inside the palazzo while carrying out informal tasks as informants, administrators, and bibliographic and legal experts within it.
Mercenaries of knowledge were “intellectual personae,” to follow Renata Ago’s formulation, who exercised different activities but defined themselves as intellectuals. They also embodied the ideal of the practical men of the Baroque era, whose ingenio allowed them to navigate difficult situations themselves and for their friends and patrons. The demand for their services was high but their relations of patronage were often unstable and weak. Friendship became a vital vector to secure resources and promote themselves. Attuned to the dangers of inquisitorial attention and experienced with exile, they cultivated through their friendships an idea of masculinity which underpinned the operations of mediation they carried out. Indeed, their world was purposively, although not entirely, masculine. Their sexuality and gender representations could be used to neutralize them since mercenaries of knowledge and their patrons disproportionately bore the infamous mark of being “sodomites” as imposed on them by institutions such as the inquisitions. Many mercenaries of knowledge bore their difficult relations with masculinity and same-sex relationships as badges of honor and as a proof of their virtue and engagement with politics that went against inquisitorial backwardness and intolerance. Friendship, patronage, and even persecution gave them platforms from which to publicize their anti-inquisitorial engagement throughout the Republic of Letters. Such engagement constitutes an invitation to consider the role that diverse forms of sexuality played in early modern intellectual and political relations.

Mercenaries of knowledge of course also suffered from categories that they bore as stigmas. Categories such as libertines, sodomites, and the insincerely converted, forced them to compromise with their ideal representations of themselves. To counterbalance those stigmas, they magnified what they called their liberty and virtue when fashioning their memories for the international audiences of the Republic of Letters. These two concepts suggested that they were able to emancipate themselves from patriotic and nationalistic prejudices, and were in consequence well prepared to share a less deterministic vision of the world with their homologues beyond political and religious divides. Mercenaries of knowledge were prepared to get actively involved in under-the-table negotiations, falsifications, or bribes to protect their

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22 On the use of ingenio by Baquianos (i.e. retired soldiers who in acted as guides in the New World) and other experts in improvising for the sake of their survival see José Ramón Marcaida’s work in progress on such figures.
23 Muir, The Culture Wars, pp. 1–12.
patrons and other mercenaries with whom they identified and collaborated. Tommaso Campanella’s editor, Kaspar Schoppe, a mercenary of knowledge who had converted to Catholicism and spent most of his life working as a polemicist, presented himself as a scholar and diplomat who worked across nations, and who thus needed protection. When publishing Campanella’s work, while the latter was in jail, Schoppe boasted about his “liberty” to select his patron as well as his freedom (i.e. libertas) to threaten any powerful figures he wanted with the documents he owned.  

Another mercenary of knowledge, the writer Manuel Faria de Sousa, who in appearance served Spanish interests during most of his life, underlined that he “never negotiated his liberty” in exchange for vain and immediate interests. Though that liberty could invite attacks, it was itself an arm to deploy against potential enemies.

As intellectual personae, mercenaries of knowledge took great care when memorializing their deeds to a public audience which included friends, patrons, rivals, and enemies. By doing so, they joined a Baroque cohort of voices who relied on autobiographic narratives to make a place for themselves and for their ambivalent relations to the social and identity categories they were initially drafted with. The story of the life of Catalina de Erauso (c. 1585–c. 1650), known as the Lieutenant Nun, condensed what many mercenaries of knowledge experienced between the late sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth century. Catalina was born to a well-to-do noble family of northern Spain. While her father and her brothers served the local administration and participated in the transcontinental wars of the Iberian empire, Catalina was supposed to remain silent, isolated, and pray for the fate of her family between the narrow walls of her convent cell. Against all odds, Catalina escaped what she considered to be her prison. She cross-dressed and made her way to the Spanish royal court. During the rest of her life, she traveled back and forth between Europe and the New World, self-fashioning as a soldier and a writer, fighting on behalf of the Spanish king in the Americas, and hiding from local authorities while trying to make a living through gambling and killing. Although it is not clear where her trajectory ended, whether in Spain or in Mexico (probably in Cotaxtla), Catalina ultimately came before the Pope to ask for redemption. Her cross-dressing practices and her multiple identities, if not fully redeemed in Rome,
acquired legitimate meaning through her quest for redemption. The fact that she/he positioned her/himself somewhere between reality and fiction, thanks to her/his talent as a woman/man of letters who could craft and publicize her/his mémoires, gave sense to a life spent accumulating knowledge based on her/his experiences and broadcasting those experiences across and beyond the empire.

Erauso’s trajectory ran in parallel to, and probably crossed lines with, other representatives of her/his generation who, despite international wars and local jealousies, experienced similar fates and found outlets through the social networks of the Republic of Letters between Madrid, the Americas, and Rome. Such lives resonated even more widely through autobiographical accounts that were printed and staged in Baroque theaters. Not all mercenaries of knowledge benefited or suffered from such public exposure, but Spanish, Portuguese, and papal archives confirm that one common feature was the quest for bona fama across scholarly and political networks. Recovering their trajectories shows that – between, or even behind, official diplomats and transimperial agents – a world of mercenaries filled the gray areas of Baroque cultural and political communication with their presence, ideas, and memories, and thus created personal and material connections between allegedly antagonistic powers.

Mercenaries of knowledge’s self-fashioning strategies mostly served to reaffirm their ties with learned and political elites, as well as to subvert clear-cut religious affiliations. Their relations of patronage as well as the friendships they made across overlapping diplomatic and intellectual networks were negotiated on a continuous basis. Their patrons were themselves confronted with the instability of their times, and often experienced exile or displacement themselves. In such situations, these same patrons needed experienced and multi-embedded mercenaries who could offer them timely information that was needed to face the consequences of their displacements.

By obtaining and selling rare books and natural products, among other collectibles, mercenaries of knowledge sought to furnish their patrons with the capacity to locate, possess, and display hard-to-find objects, as a sign of the broad reach of the latter’s communication networks as much as of their talents for good governance in war times. If a mercenary was successful, it was his patron who enjoyed the most public recognition. Patrons, too, were in need of bona fama and good political outcomes.

27 This observation is best put into perspective when reading Alonso de Contreras’ Vida de este capitán.
28 Levin, Agents of Empire; Malcolm, Agents of Empire; and Rothman, Brokering Empire.