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VENICE MISAPPROPRIATED

A Review of John Martin and Dennis Romano, eds., **Venice Reconsidered. The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797**. Baltimore, Md. (– London): The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.[1]

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Scholarship concerning Venice has long been a particularly fruitful and fascinating venue, both for those to whom the city herself was the focus of attention and for those who were interested in other matters for which Venice served as a unique case study or laboratory. For anyone dealing, directly or indirectly, with Venice as a *polis*, as a form of structured human living-together in a specific time and space, the key point is that she turned out to be the most stable and – partially because of this – the most successful example in the history of humankind, or at least of the 'West' since antiquity. As Edward Muir says in the best essay in the book under review, "the city of Venice never fell, never saw a single inhabitant killed, never witnessed a single errant soldier loot or rape." (138)[2] Not conquered for 1,000 years – for those who do not realize what this meant for all citizens, indeed for all people living in Venice, some pause for thought is suggested. A short glance, e.g., at Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra* (2000 [~1810-1820/1863]) should remind even the most hardened 21st Century intellectual abstractionist, secure, aloof and detached from existential threat, of why this is so. The first human right is that to life, and then to physical integrity – the original reason for any state at all: "a state comes into existence for the purpose of ensuring survival". (Aristotle, *Politika* I 1252b) This success is therefore the lens through which everything else should be seen if one deals with Venice.

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[1] xvi, 538 pp.; ISBN 0-8018-6312-0; listed publication date: 23 December 2000. The press's information sheet for reviewers lists the price as US$ 54.00; their website, as well as Amazon, list it only as US$ 49.95. Amazon also provides several sample pages (at http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0801863120/slide-show/107-6265873-8999725#reader-link; all web-links are valid as of 9 May 2002).

[2] All single page-numbers without further identification refer to the book under review. If there is no further indication in the text, this refers to passages written by the editors. Essays by individual contributors are listed by their name and – if applicable – page-number; usually, however, the text will indicate this. Secondary literature is cited by author, year, and – if applicable – page-number.

Venetian inner strife was also minimal – there were attempts at takeovers, there were revolts and revolutions, but amazingly few, and with relatively minor side-effects. In the end, it is arguable that there was no real revolution, but just adaptation and reform – compare that with any other city over that period of time! One would think that the political historian, scientist, theorist, or philosopher would thus always want to begin with the question for the reason for all this. (Surprisingly, this has not always been the case.) Venice's situation was and is of course highly specific, not least because of her physical location. The lagoon made successful defense, thanks to the fleet, quite easily possible. But this cannot be all, perhaps not even decisive; other *poleis* were well defensible, too. Nor was all this lost on the Venetians or on her observers through history; this exceptionalism is the very basis of the 'Myth of Venice'.

Venice, then as now, was despised and attacked as well, by interested and genuinely concerned parties alike, and this led to the 'Counter-Myth of Venice', featuring such negative aspects as a police state attitude, pathological secrecy, oligarchic rule of a rigid aristocracy, and so on. All the more interesting is that exactly those aspects turn out to look quite a bit like reasons for Venice's overall success if one investigates them closer and unideologically – and surely, this must also be the approach of a volume such as this, dedicated as it is to going beyond 'Myth' and 'Counter-Myth'. (2–9)

There is, for instance, a simple functional reason for the oligarchic or aristocratic limitation of the electorate – not different from, but more pronounced, and more successful, than in her Tuscan sister states.[3] Simply speaking, to have all male aristocrats of age be members of the main decision-making body, and vote in complicated sessions at least once a week, meant that one had a large pool of qualified candidates who could take over political, administrative, or judicial functions at a moment's notice, because they were up-to-date on the state's business, the rules and regulations, and the larger policies. Only such a large viable recruitment pool makes rapid turnover in appointments possible, and that in turn was the main safeguard against the tyranny of one man or family to which almost all other Italian city republics sooner or later succumbed.

As regards the cliché of secretiveness, Peter Burke addresses this very nicely in his essay in this volume: "Some scholars have spoken of the government's 'obsession' with secrecy. Their concern was not pathological but simply a reaction to a political system in which an unusually large number of people had access to *arcana imperii*, which in monarchies were the preserve of the few." (394) In other words, what looks like a drawback at first turns out to be the symptom of an advantage.

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[3] Apart from any 'Myth of Democracy', it would actually be interesting to evaluate whether less Venetians had a genuine say in the election of the Doge than, for instance, Americans have today in the election of the United States President. Certainly, the latter share – unless accidentally upset, as in the Bush/Gore Florida recounts – the feeling they do, which is all that is necessary; whereas the former probably agreed to the election in an almost Kantian sense by tacit consent. But as far as the actual decision-making is concerned, both amount to about the same, only that the Venetian model would not be acceptable in today's 'Western' political culture, whereas the American one is.

But perhaps the ultimate success of Venice is to have solved one of the oldest and most serious problems of political philosophy – together with the rule of the best –, and that is the "Who watches the watchman?" problem. Plato solves it theoretically in the *Politeia*: The rulers must be those who would rather do something else. In Plato's world, these are people who would rather think, i.e. who do not crave for power because they are philosophers: the philosopher kings. This is a model that works, but only within the larger framework. Equally of course, the *Politeia* is a heuristic utopia, i.e. not a genuine utopia that is supposed to be pursued, but an image in the sky that should be looked at so as to lead to the *realization* of truth; of how things are connected. In reality, it is not supposed to work and would be a nightmarish system indeed. (See Drechsler 1998 for the detailed argument.)

In Venice, therefore, something had to be substituted for the "something" the rulers would rather do. And this was business. Venetian aristocrats would rather not rule, because what would happen to their business interests? The unique identity of aristocracy and business elite, and a system that made civil service not lucrative, but tardy and dull, as well as difficult and dangerous, make one really envision a world in which a riddle was solved that we have not solved today. It would have been interesting to find more on this, and one would expect something long those lines, in the book under review as well.

However, interdisciplinarity is not one of its strengths. The absence of lawyers, economists, and philosophers among the authors is painfully obvious and causes a distorted image of Venice, which is counter-productive to the self-set mission of the book to deliver an overall picture, and its interdisciplinary claim. (x) Likewise, the lack of interest in foreign affairs, military matters, or diplomacy gives a strangely domestic picture of Venice (and, admittedly, the *terraferma*). Basically, this is a history book with some contributions by art historians and musicologists. It may be that one needs "to go beyond purely legal and institutional perspectives" (13); however, without them, one is even more lost.

Unfortunately, the same is true as regards the comparative approach. The subtitle – "The History and Civilization of *an* Italian City-State" (my italics) – indicates that this book might be something of a case study. But it is not at all – comparisons are totally missing, be it with other maritime republics (Genoa), Tuscan sisters (Lucca, Florence), or with Hanseatic towns (Lübeck), which could have yielded so much. We can see this, for instance, in Claudio Povolo's remark, "compared with the other Italian states, the Republic of Venice, especially with regard to the administrative and judicial machinery, was strikingly unique." (493) Yes, but how, exactly? We know that in Venice, there was comparatively little public corruption, partially due to a highly intrinsic costing, accounting, and auditing system; the system of checks and balances, so disabling in other city republics, worked very well here. Why and how?

As regards the historical neighboring or sub-disciplines of art, cultural, and music history, the contributions from these fields are generally quite nice. Debra Pincus' "Hard Times and Ducal Radiance. Andrea Dandolo and the Construction of the Ruler in the Fourteenth-Century Venice" (89–136) is altogether very good and nicely illustrated; of course, this is classical art history, whose connection with political issues as in this essay is since almost a century a staple of the discipline. Martha Feldman's "Opera, Festivity, and Spectacle in 'Revolutionary' Venice. Phantasms of Time and History" (217–260) is perhaps not as thorough, but not without interest and quality. Peter Humfrey's "Veronese's High Altarpiece for San Sebastiano. A Patrician Commission for a Counter Reformation Church" (365–388) is, if somewhat conjectural and perhaps overstretched in interpretation, a nice, traditional piece of art-historical analysis that is always enjoyable to read.

There are also some independent but very solid essays on specific historical phenomena. Peter Burke's already-cited "Early Modern Venice as a Center of Information and Communication" (389–419) is a thoroughly researched, well-documented, and well-argued essay indeed, and an excellent case study as well. It also gives a larger picture more than any other essay in the book. Finally, it shows how amazingly many research topics on Venice have remained untackled so far. (See 393) Robert C. Davis' "Slave Redemption in Venice, 1585–1797" (454–487) likewise fills out lacunae and helps us to understand the phenomenon he addresses.

So far, so good. To address most of the other remaining essays,[4] we need to finally look at the volume as a whole, however. First of all, technically, it is well produced and has a good index; a comprehensive bibliography, perhaps additional to individual ones, is unfortunately missing. There are some illustrations, but in the end too few for a book like that. Production from layout to type-setting and spelling-correction to binding and cover is of high standard and completely in line with the high price.

It needs now to be said that, while the essays are altogether almost uniformely good to very good, some excellent, the book as such, i.e. the editors' creation, is one of the most saddening compilations of scholarship I have ever seen. John Martin (Trinity University) and Dennis Romano (Syracuse University) are certainly reputable Venice scholars, but here they seem to have been carried away by their project. The fulsome advance praise on the back of the dust jacket (admittedly, perhaps an unfair place to look) sums up the claim and mission of that project very well: "A dramatic reassessment... [by] leading scholars ... who insist on breaking away from a unilinear reading of Venice's past. Their studies ... challenge our overidealized assumptions and images of the Venetian republic." (Margaret Rosenthal) This is probably meant as praise and not ironically, although to accuse historians of *insisting* to break away from some interpretation surely means that no attempt at scholarship is made, but that preconceived ideological notions determine the outcome of the studies.

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[4] Of the 15 pieces in the book (14 essays and the introduction), three are not considered in detail in the present review: Elisabeth Crouzet's "Towards an Ecological Understanding of the Myth of Venice" (39–64), Richard Mackenney's "'A Plot Discover'd?' Myth, Legend, and the 'Spanish' Conspiracy against Venice in 1618" (185–216), and Federica Ambrosini's "Toward a Social History of Women in Venice: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment" (420–453).

In sum, this is an attempt to sell several certainly up-to-date and usually high-quality but by no means ground-breaking or systematic conference contributions by some of the leading Venice historians today as the ultimate in Venetian history paradigm-shifting, although the paradigm from which the shifting was allegedly done is a mere paper tiger that since a very long time does not exist anymore, if it ever did.

It is said again and again that "The picture of Venice that emerges from these essays is, we believe, strikingly different from earlier portrayals of the Republic's history." (ix) But it is not. The inner dust jacket promises "a dynamic portrait of Venice ... In contrast to earlier efforts ..., a more fluid and complex interpretation". Who begs to differ? Surely not two of the most eminent Venice scholars of the 20th Century, Felix Gilbert and Frederic C. Lane, father figures to the editors and several authors it seems, to whom the volume is dedicated. (v) They were not half as close-minded as Martin and Romano appear to imply.

Society is said to have been more complex than stated earlier – sure; all societies are, and both the dynamics of history and mere fashion now lead to the study of other than the dominating groups. (x) This is nothing special, nothing specific, nothing new. It also easily leads to not seeing any forest because of the trees; and seeing the forest again would certainly be 'newer', if that is then the goal, than any yesteryear's vision of 'new social history'.

In sum, "The themes found in this volume – the collapse of the old chronological boundaries of Venetian history, the emphasis on fluidity and process in the study of Venetian politics and society, the intrinsic role of art, music, and literature in fashioning the ways Venetians understood and viewed themselves" (xi), are not new, nor original or innovative, and have been made, where they are relevant (and not only there), elsewhere and mostly better by authors both within and without this collection, the former including, for example, Gerhard Rösch, James Grubb, and Stanley Chojnacki.

In consequence, the introductory chapter, "Reconsidering Venice" (1–35), the only piece of longer writing by the editors, is an example of the "Look, Ma, no hands!" school of scholarship.[5] Every historian of Venice who disagreed back when he or she wrote with what Martin and Romano believe now is chided for that. All fine and good to debunk myths, but not if the child is thrown out with the bathwater. Admittedly, precisely this tends to be part of the scholarly process, but from today's perspective, the Martin/Romano approach is not very sophisticated at all. Which is why the book under review has such an old-fashioned, at best 1980s feel to it. Some better theoretical thought (8–9) is forgotten as soon as it is mentioned, thus looking like mere window-dressing. Otherwise, the editors rely on what sounds like the theory taught at mid-brow graduate schools a quarter of a century ago. And as far as the 'new openness' is concerned, their introduction abounds in such scary statements as "it is no longer possible to imagine" something (18); just because a scholar or two have said something else? What to do with statements such as "we must think"? (263) Must we?[6]

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[5] An "uncorrected proof" of the introductory chapter can be found on the web at http://www.press.jhu.edu/press/books/titles/sampler/martin.htm.

Yet even worse than the introduction are the small essay introductions by the editors to their contributors' work, which tell us, in the best Soviet school-book tradition, exactly how to interpret what follows, according to Party line. (39, 67, 89, 138, 169, 217, 339, 389, 492) These violent instructions mark the editors' attempt to force a single message out of this rich variety of texts, mocking the very openness they so strongly purport (*viz*., as long as it is *their* kind of openness, in the vein of Marcuse's "repressive tolerance" theory). This is the most shocking feature of the book, and it is hermeneutically deeply illegitimate.[7]

Let us now look, in this light, at some of the essays and essay-groups that are among the most important in this book. The Venetian system of economic, trade, and industrial policy was indeed stupendous; it appears to have come straight out of a Schumpeterian analysis and may easily serve as a model for today in many respects. (See Reinert 1999) It is no surprise, then, that the first book that theorizes this fact, Antonio Serra's *Breve trattato* of 1613, was called "the first ... scientific treatise ... on Economic Principles and Policy" by Schumpeter himself. (1954, 195) Not a word about Serra or this phenomenon in the present book, though. To say, as the editors say in the introduction, that "Economic historians no longer emphasize the problem of the origins of capitalism but examine instead the complex ways in which the Venetian economy both shaped and was shaped by social and political realities" (20) is as plainly wrong as it is misleading; anyway, there is hardly any economics in this book at all, more's the pity. The only vaguely economic essay, Patricia Fortini Brown's "Behind the Walls. The Material Culture of Venetian Elites" (294–338), is marked by a notable absence of any economic theory or even matrix; the study of Venetian aristocrats' luxury consumption yells out for the use of Thorstein Veblen's (2001 [1899]) or Werner Sombart's (1996 [1913/1922]) theories on the subject, but those are not even mentioned.[8]

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[6] A key part of the introduction is a heavily forced historiography of Venice. An also 'critical' yet much more fruitful and serious discussion of Venetian historiography, particularly important in light of the 'Myth – Counter-Myth' topos, can fortunately be found in the same book, Povolo's "The Creation of Venetian Historiography" (491–519). It is far too thin on theory and reflections on ideology and identity-creation as well, alas (the attempt at 492–494, and 509 n. 7 is too limited), and it suffers from an ideological bias and even some neophytism, but it is helpful nonetheless.

[7] This is all the worse as, again, the essays are altogether very good, and hardly any author (and none of the more notable ones) share the editors' obsession with neophytism. Some make their kowtow into that direction, but usually – again, as in Soviet writing – at the beginning and sometimes at the end of an essay, leaving the center part free for serious scholarship.

[8] But as a socio-cultural study, the essay is interesting and has considerable merits, if here comparative perspectives are particularly wanting (such as with Lübeck, for which similar research has been done), and although the essay is not really brought to any conclusion. (See Brown 329)

As has been said, probably the best contribution is Edward Muir's, whom the editors praise (12–13, 25, 137) in a for them most dangerous way, for here is a scholar who significantly advances our understanding of Venice, as he has done in previous publications. (See only Muir 1981) And even the editors have to admit that "According to Muir, republican tradition did matter." (137) Of course it did, as it always does – one of the classics of political science of the recent decades, Robert D. Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* (1993), shows how important social capital and civic traditions, which can and perhaps must easily go back centuries, are for today's citizens' involvement and *therefore* also for the economic success of a region. As for Venice, the extent of citizens' involvement is absolutely stunning, as is the time for which it lasted.[9] But in the present book, with the exception of Muir, such thoughts do not even enter the discourse.

In his essay, "Was There Republicanism in the Renaissance Republics? Venice after Agnadello" (137–167), Muir refers to "the bitter antipathy of provincial elites toward the Venetian oligarchs, to whom artisans and peasants seem to have had a curious loyalty. ... peasants stood by the Venetian Republic". (138) Not so curious, of course, if one considers the matter for a moment. "As a political system the Venetian Republic was many, sometimes not completely compatible things." (139) Naturally so, but it certainly deserves to be underlined at this point. And when Muir describes the possibility of litigation as a key for provincial inclusion (see esp. 139, 159) – actually, one could call that simply an incremental *Rechtsstaat* –, with his remark that this was "probably all that could be achieved in the absence of the utopian republic that some contemporaries imagined" (139), he uses exactly the perspective that was called for earlier in this review. With all Venice's darker sides, the search for scholarly *terra incognita*, professional debunking, and ignoring the lessons she can offer will obscure today's perspective, which *invariably* must determine historical reflection at least to a considerable extent. As unfashionable as it may sound to the editors' ears, Wordsworth's line from the famous "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic " (1802), "Venice, the eldest Child of Liberty", is simply more correct than not.

Accordingly, the treatment by the editors of Gasparo Contarini, the most eminent Venetian constitutionalist, state thinker, and political philosopher, is sad (16), but here, too, Muir has much to offer. (Muir, 147–148) Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Gouernment of Venice* (1551; English 1599) served later, *inter alia*, as the basis for one of the most important utopias in Anglo-American and thus 'Western' political philosophy, Thomas Harrington's *Oceana* (1867 [1656]). Patricia Fortini Brown's dealing with Contarini (Brown 299–300) thus seems likewise a bit 'out of date', because it is missing the sophistication that comes with a larger perspective, never mind what Contarini wanted to accomplish or in which context he operated. That is of course interesting as such and well brought out by Muir. (147–148) Elizabeth G. Gleason's "Confronting New Realities. Venice and the Peace of Bologna, 1530" (168–184), is similarly helpful (see esp. 178-180); this is not surprising, as she is the author of the main modern monograph on Contarini (1993). To say that Contarini "challenged the Venetian ruling class to rise to great heights of political wisdom, and the rest of Europe to emulate what was best in Venice" (180) sums up the complex situation extremely well.

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[9] Incidentally, one of the most serious of the few factual mistakes in Putnam regards Venice (which he does not cover in detail), *viz.*, when he says that "By the seventeenth century, all the cities of central and northern Italy had ceased to be republican or even, in many cases, independent." (1993, 135) Very obviously, Venice (and also Lucca) falsifies the "all", and that matters, because it shows her (and Lucca's) specificity.

Stanley Chojnacki's treatment of Contarini (282–284) again overemphasizes historical context matters and forgets the wider importance of the book, but the context of the 'Third *Serrata*' is by and large convincingly demonstrated. The same aspect is also brought out very nicely in James S. Grubb's "Elite Citizens" (339–364), a fine, traditional, and modest study of the *cittadini* class, in all its subtlety and fluctuation; it does not change any older concepts, but nuances and fills them out quite admirably.[10]

The *Serrata*, the closure of the aristocracy, is, according to the editors, "now seen, not as a moment of legislative definition, but rather as an ongoing political and social process." (x; also 17) Well, of course; what else? The late Gerhard Rösch's essay on "The Serrata of the Great Council and Venetian Society, 1286–1323" (67–88) is unfortunately one of his weakest pieces, especially conceptually, and strangely self-congratulatory (see 68); his unfinished brief introduction to Venetian history (2000) is ultimately superior. Chojnacki's already-mentioned "Identity and Ideology in Renaissance Venice. The Third *Serrata*" (263–294) is marred precisely by ideology, if not by identity, but it can be read with considerable interest. Yet in other essays, perhaps inevitably, the "traditional" interpretation of the ('original') *Serrata* of 1297 is reconfirmed. (Brown 298; Grubb 348; even the editors themselves, 365)

The editors' statement that "Venice, despite its appearance of stability, was a city of constant change in both its internal social arrangements and its relations with the outside world" (15) is, as we can see here, at once a truism and misleading. All stable-appearing human institutions are in flux – it depends on the level one investigates –; but compared to any other social structure of that size, Venice was incredibly stable. Here, too, an insight of Schumpeter would have been helpful to recall, *viz*. that "the upper strata of society are like hotels which are indeed always full of people, but people who are forever changing." (1934, 156) Structures may last, the people therein do not; and if one manages to let some succession in an office, such as that of King, look like a continuity of blood, no gene test would and does confirm this for more than three generations in a row. *A fortiori* is this true for an entire group, such as an aristocracy.

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[10] It is interesting to compare this with Grubb's famous 1986 essay, with which the editors so much identify (7; 28 n. 2) but which in spite of similarities in approach, of its muckraking tendency, and of ist simply breathtaking arrogance is still much more sophisticated, and especially in the very end much more subtle as concerns the myths (Grubb 1986, 94), than the editors' handling of the same subject matter.

In sum, once again, the scholarship represented in this volume, the editors claim, “has done away with a unilinear reading of Venice’s past, a reading that was perhaps too uncritically linked to a traditional narrative of Western development.” (27) But studies of the ‘Myth of Venice’ and the ‘Counter-Myth’ have formed the historiography of Venice since at least a century; both myths are almost *aufgehoben* here in the Hegelian sense. The real myth-destruction, if any, would therefore have lain in the *opposite* direction of the one taken by the editors, in the reconstruction of the ‘Myth’ from today’s perspective. The first thing that would have then to be admitted is that much of it *was* real – of which the myth itself surely is a part, within as well as without Venice herself.

On the other hand, it would have been interesting to find out how and why Fernand Braudel’s notion that “Venetian economy was largely the story of the Republic’s inability to adjust to the shifting economic structures of the long sixteenth century” (6) is plainly wrong – the same with the famous story of Venetian decline in the 18th Century. If there is a part of the rise-and-decline myth, then it is surely that of the decadent, party-minded, economically impoverished amusement park of the eternal carnival that Venice was supposed to be in the *settecento*. But as Rösch says in his aforementioned last book that his untimely death unfortunately turned into a fragment (2000), although even he doesn’t quite seem to realize what praise this actually is,

> The Senate kept out of all important questions [of world politics], so that between 1718 and 1797 there was peace. Those coming later have praised the foresight of this peace policy, but generally it is true – and this was viewed similarly already by contemporaries – that the settecento was seen as a time of decadence and decline. This endeared picture, however, needs some corrections. Economically, the 18th Century was a time of progress, sea trade recuperated since the 1730s, so that Venice’s tonnage turnover was larger than ever before. (169)

Now *that* is something one would like to read about in a ‘reconsideration’ of Venice, but – nothing whatsoever.

So, what we have here is the at first sight oxymoronic case of a bad book that contains mostly good to excellent essays. What to do with it? No groundbreaking, no paradigm-shifting here, but Venice experts may, and good university libraries should, buy it nonetheless. It is only to be hoped that soon we will have a scholarly volume in which Venice will really be reconsidered, rather than misappropriated.

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