

THE FALL AND RISE OF VENICE AS A SEA PORT: MARINE MANAGEMENT, SUSTAINABILITY, AND THE ECONOMICS OF HERITAGE¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the historical and contemporary role of Venice, Italy as a seaport, marine playground and aquatic community in Southern Europe. Venice is an urban enigma established on salt-clay marshes and a network of micro islands shaped by the currents and tides of the Adriatic, the Ionian Sea and the wider Mediterranean. Within Venice ecology, economics and culture are inextricably linked to the conflict between human and natural capital. Despite frequent attempts to neatly arrange the challenges in sustaining the city convenient categorical interest groups, the complexity, ambiguity and occasional hostility in implementing policies, suggests integrated management is elusive. The material presented below considers a general and specific theme: the ecological longevity of Venice and the historical and contemporary dilemmas between merchant agents navigating and traversing the waters and its impact on fall and rise of Venice. The study specifically seeks to explore four related points that primarily influence sustainability and commercial interests in Venice: 1) Venice as a port within an UNESCO designated site; 2) the environment and sustainability concerns facing Venice, including rising water, sinking foundations and water pollution, for example the control of emissions such as sulphur and the operations of sea defences such as MOSE; 3) the multifaceted uses of water in Venice for transportation, subsistence and culture; 4) the operation and management of motor powered vessels in domestic commercial and regional activities.

KEYWORDS:

** Venice * port development * urban and regional policy * sustainability * collaboration and coordination*

INTRODUCTION

Venice is well-known for its (un)natural uniqueness. Since its foundation, the Venetian Republic considered Venice and its lagoon as a single entity. Venice was established in the fifth century on a network of 188 small islands, originally to provide a haven from invasion. It was added to the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1987 (WCED, 1987). It is not an exaggeration to suggest that 2017-18 might see Venice being added to the UNESCO list of endangered sites.

The emergence of Venice during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance through wealth accumulated by international merchant trade facilitated the rapid development of architectural and artistic temples on fragile foundations. Water and development are intrinsic to the everyday life and expansion of the city. Deheyna and Shaffer (2007) illustrate how the delicate environment has been heavily altered by intense anthropogenic intervention: pollution, population and integration being notable in the control of sanitation and disease. Venice endearingly survives through innovations and restrictions. Boisson (1999:2) in an incisive paper on sea safety and accident prevention writes that the very first regulations appeared in Venice in 1255, 'they made it illegal to exceed the draught, marked on each ship by a cross'.

Whilst the decline of its architecture has continued rapidly since the publication of John Ruskin's celebrated warning in *The Stones of Venice* published in 1853, few unless of a Napoleonic ilk, who hated the city, would dispute the claim that Venice remains one of the world's most beautiful cities. Buisine (2005) writes emphatically on the rich mosaic of history, display, decadence and decay merging in spectacular colour on the surface of the lagoon. Ironically, the deterioration that erodes the arteries leading to and escaping from the heart of the city adds to its mystique, deceptions which can conspire against the need for urgency and agreement.

Flooding is a part of the history of Venice. It has fundamentally shaped the City since it was populated. Tidal flooding is the catalyst for projects such as the MOSE initiative, an ambitious engineering project to locate mobile barriers in the inlets to the Lagoon, the Lido, Malamocco and Chioggia being critical sites. The completion of the MOSE initiative in 2017 provides the motivation for re-examining the various challenges facing Venice.

In seeking to avoid the flattening of frequently opposed interests, the material below examines the conditional role of cooperation and coordination operating between parties intent of preserving Venice from each other. Identifying anomalies, ambiguities and disputes in policy and practice, the paper explores the value of diplomatic solutions in navigating the unevenness that effectively frustrates sustainable solutions and progress.

The paper uses a multi-disciplinary approach to address and measure sustainability indicators, regulatory policies, cultural reference points and commercial practice to examine the ecological and economic 'realities' that threaten the survival of the stubbornly resilient. The material is interested in the varied interests that propose and oppose the formulation and operation of regulations, restrictions and rules. Therefore the paper recognises relevance of voluntary and mandatory requirements introduced and managed by organisations such as Lloyd's Register, The International Maritime Organisation (IMO), The European Environment Programme

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and regional and domestic entities, a nexus of bodies informing and shaping management decisions in the Adriatic and inland sea of Venice.

To reiterate: the study specifically seeks to explore four related points that primarily influence sustainability and commercial interests in Venice: 1) Venice as a port within an UNESCO designated site; 2) the environment and sustainability concerns facing Venice, including rising water, sinking foundations and water pollution, for example the control of emissions such as sulphur and the operations of sea defences such as MOSE; 3) the multifaceted use of water in Venice for transportation, subsistence and culture; 4) the operation and management of motor powered vessels in domestic commercial and regional activities.

VENETIAN LIFE: THE CITY, THE PORT AND CULTURE

Venice was added to UNESCO heritage list in 1987. The city office is located in Venice in the sestiere of Castello at the Palazzo Zorzi Offices, close to the Campo Santa Maria Formosa, and a short distance from Piazza San Marco, Riva degli Schiavoni and the Church of San Zaccaria. The office promotes and enables international cooperation in South East Europe (SEE). Within Venice, the office mobilises tactics to influence and informs policy on protecting the City and the Lagoon.

Venice is well known throughout the world as a vibrant tourist destination. Statistics produced by the Città di Venezia indicate each year, between twelve to fifteen million visitors, arrive to enjoy the lagoon and the rich network of islands, which collectively are home to the treasures of Venetian heritage. The 'obligatory' and expensive ride on the gondola, a visit to the Basilica San Marco or a walk possibly sketched in J.G. Links Venice for Pleasure, are part of the common itinerary. Interestingly, whilst not necessarily having a major impact on the lagoon and canals, the influence of the gondolas should not be underestimated in the affairs of the Grand Canal. The gondola is an important symbol in Venetian culture; the owners being powerful in local politics.

The sight of bewildered tourists, wading through and traversing precarious wooden platforms in floodwater in the Piazza San Marco in frequent photographs and news items heightens the perceptions of vulnerability the economics of heritage. Rova; Pranovi and Muller (2015:14) set out the challenges explicitly, the most important among degrees of (un)sustainability being 'tourism, fishing, aquaculture, industrial activities, maritime shipping and port development of urban areas and related activities, and agriculture', conclusively a list of threats animating a range of tensions that invariably interest the visitor and terrify and the resident.

Water is central to life in Venice. Annually events such as la biennale di Venezia, which includes international film, art, architecture and contemporary dance festivals help to sustain a creative atmosphere from July through to September. In February, the Carnival of Venice celebrates the heritage of the City with dramatic displays on the lagoon and the canals. Canaletto's eighteenth century representation of the St. Mark's Basin and the animated Regatta at Ca' Foscara, capture a scene of celebration on the Grand Canal and records how the ceremonies on the water have been a major part of Venetian life for centuries.

Further from the Grand Canal and its immediate arteries: the islands, the lagoon and the valleys, which include the Venetian Riviera on the Lido di Jesolo with its long sandy beaches, compete for attention. The "island of glass" at Murano, which continues the historic tradition of glass making, is an important commodity for export to the United States and throughout Europe. In meeting the increased demand for water sports, the expansion of port facilities in the marinas such as the Portobaseleghe, Darsena Dell'Orologio and the Marina di Cortellazzo at the lido di Jesolo highlight the importance of yachting to the region. The far from invisible buzzing of the water ambulances and funeral boats that operate close to the Fondamenta Nuove; vessels filled with flowers following the route of Vaporetto No.5 to the island of San Michele, contribute approximately to the 13,000 motor boats operating in Venice every day.

Historically, Venice has been presented as the 'mistress of the sea'. Its location provided an important link to East and West routes, between Islam and Byzantine and Catholic Christianity. In 1271, when Marco Polo, aged 17, set out from Venice with his father and uncle on a journey across Asia, experiencing a world never before described, Venice was becoming a major sea power.

Vitality and apathy have plagued the City from the ninth century to the present. Hay (1966:369) reveals the early benefits of trade 'Venice's predominance was above all in Alexandria, the Syrian ports and in the islands of Cyprus and Greece. Originally, and still in the early fourteenth century, this oriental trade was mainly significant for the importation of precious commodities: pepper, ginger, spices of all kinds, sugar and other goods and recherché dyestuffs (like indigo), silk and cotton.

Emerging as a viable Empire on water, sea trade expanded east and west. Notable were the commercial agents scattered around the area of the Rialto (the location used by Shakespeare in the Merchant of Venice). The vibrancy of Venice as a port is captured in the literature of Il porto di Venezia (1997: 23) 'wheat was stored along the canal bank of St. Marks; salt near the Punta Della Dogana; a little further along the Giudecca canal, timber brought on rafts (zattere) along the rivers was unloaded and even today that canal bank is called 'Zattere'.

The importance of Venice to European and international trade should not be underestimated, it previously having been given currency through the idea of the "Mediterranean", which stretched to the Africa and the Middle East. Davis (1997:334-5) maps the growth of trade and 'with a chain of forts, trading stations and later colonies at Ragusa, Corfu, Corinth, Crete, and Cyprus, the Venetian galleys could protect the convoys carrying silks, spices, silver and slaves, timber corn and salt.' Through alliance and treaties, Venice was able to manage its spread east through various charters, which propelled the Lagoon and the City State to important status throughout Europe. Brown (1997:21) makes clear the special role of Venice in the world through the daring or criminality of its citizens. 'Venice had been trading with the Islamic world, as well as with Byzantium, as early as the ninth century, when two Venetian merchants stole the relics of St. Mark from Alexandria.' The audaciousness of the Venetians abroad returned wealth and prestige, and underpinned an influence that would continue until it was finally destroyed by Napoleon in 1797.

The wealth attributed to Venice through its maritime exploits was invested in the architecture of the City. Lowe (1974: 63), in the chapter Viva Goldoni! makes clear the flowering of entertainment and culture, and its attraction to artists throughout the world. The correlation between rising affluence and spending on major projects led to opulent palaces and churches such as the Palazzi Moncenigo and San Geremia that still line the Grand Canal, a factor that encouraged visits by the creative intelligentsia, Lord Byron being a natural resident. Fischer (1996: 59) captures the transitory glory, 'Venice became the golden city of the west. Its purse-proud merchants looked with envy upon the palazzo ca d'oro, a palace entirely covered with gold. They prayed in the Cathedral of San

Marco before the pala d'oro, a screen of gold. They dreamed of gold, lived for gold, and at St.Mark's they even appeared to worship gold.'

The influx of trade and exodus of merchant entrepreneurialism catapulted Venice to international prominence, which fuelled tensions with other trading states and the Church. The City became a catalyst for adventurism and opportunity. With it grew debauchery and decadence. Casanova's infamous, *The History of My Life*, the multivolume set illustrates the excess of wealth and power polluting Venice like a ravenous algae.

The counter-hegemonic gains of the Ottoman Empire since the beginning of the twelfth century and the gradual shift in the importance of maritime routes worked to undermine the position of Venice as a major influence in regional affairs. By the late seventeenth century, conflict, newly discovered routes, changing technology and the fluctuating shifts in the supply of commodities, cumulatively punctured the bubble that fuelled the supremacy of Venice.

During 2003-2006, the IONAS project considered the balance between a "common way of life" and economic development. Essentially, the project explored the life-quality of the inhabitants and commercial requirements stemming primarily from the sea traffic arriving and departing from the port. Whilst acknowledging the benefit of tools such as 'Ecomaps' in a descriptive context and from wider classification, the project illustrated a need for additional interventions to mitigate the high level of economic and environmental risks triggered by climate change and pollution.

CONCLUSION

It is worthwhile to reiterate that the development of Venice needs to be sensitive to the well-populated historic centre (modern ports, such as Southampton, avoid this problem). The balance between sustaining the Venetian "way of life", which has been struggling with the loss of jobs in the banking, insurance and creative industries, and ensuring that the port realises its potential in import and export traffic (commercial and passenger) necessitates reflection on a range of problems that are historical, cultural, political and economic in origin.

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