

VENICE AND GENOA:

TWO STYLES, ONE SUCCESS*

At first sight, the situations of Venice and of Genoa seem to be almost as identical as mirror images. They are set at the head of the two deepest bays in the Mediterranean, both of them being virtually at the physical centre of that sea, and seemed fated by geography to act as rallying-points for East and West, and as bridge-heads for North and South. This, however, is not overly important: all countries, all nations are, in their own eyes, the physical centre of the Universe. The opportunity is always there, but it needs initiative to take advantage of it. For Venice, just as much as Genoa, had to overcome serious difficulties, both being almost cut off from their hinterland, Venice by the lagoons, Genoa by the mountains. Both cities were republics, and both ended up by having even the name of their supreme magistrate in common: the Doge. The merchandise that they exported and imported, the routes covered by their merchants, the currency, contracts,

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techniques, beliefs, and prejudices, only differed in a few details. The colonial empires were connected at several points. This made the wars between Venice and Genoa more fierce, but also made their ententes more intimate.

Venice is both the youngest and the oldest among Italy's major maritime cities. She is young because unlike Genoa, Pisa, Naples or Palermo, she has no ancient history of her own, yet old because no barbarian conquered her soil (unless we call barbarians Napoleon and the Austrian emperors) and thus she descends straight from Rome via Byzantium, of which she is the eldest daughter, or at least the most glorious one. From Byzantium she inherited not only certain striking artistic characteristics, but also certain economic and political predilections: a leaning towards centralisation and state supervision over the citizens, a love of splendour, colour, and luxury; a bent for submitting to her monopoly all sea trade, coupled with a desire to abandon to foreigners trade with the interior. Again, Venice shared with Byzantium an instinctive mistrust of sudden innovation and a strong attachment to tradition, which slowed down her development but bolstered her independence. Like the Byzantine Empire, the Venetian Republic lasted more than a thousand years, a record unmatched by any other western state.

Yet if Venice may be termed Byzantium's daughter, she is none the less a sister of Genoa and Pisa, Milan and Florence. The dynamic and revolutionary wind of the Italian communes penetrated deeply into her backstreets and swelled the sails of her ships. Venice was an urban republic, not an essentially agricultural empire like Byzantium. Of the goods that mattered at the beginning of her career only one, silk, came directly or indirectly from Byzantium; two others, glass and salt, the humble substance even the poorest people need, were not particularly a Byzantine inheritance. Venice did not sacrifice private initiative to state supervision, nor did she forego her taste for adventure in the pursuit of comfort. Ever since the beginning merchant-gentlemen and gentleman-merchants had been in the habit of rubbing shoulders in the councils and in the markets. They kept pushing one another in competition for the most profitable bargains and the most advantageous government posts, but eventually realized that it would be impossible for them to remain on top as an elite unless they stopped

quarreling. Closely watched by them, the Doges soon lost their princely attitude and prerogatives; they were presidents elected for life by the community, and they never managed to regain any authoritarian or hereditary power as overlords. As for the lower orders, who saw themselves excluded forever from any effective control over the political life of the city at the very moment when their Florentine and Genoese contemporaries were getting in reach of the most important positions, they were in part recompensed by the devotion and foresight of the aristocracy, which took upon itself the most onerous tasks, and while keeping back the best for themselves, still saw to it that even those disinherited and out of work did not lack for food.

This sketch does nothing more than touch on a few aspects of Venice's history; it would need to be brought into focus here and there. But in its concision, it may help to bring the contrasts with Genoese history, traced in an equally simplified fashion, into relief. Let us leave out ancient times, which are separated from the medieval renewal by a gaping void in the sources which both past and present historians are forced to fill with legend. In the sixth century, Genoa, having escaped the first wave of Lombard invasions, nearly began its career as Venice did, as the advance-guard of the Byzantine Empire in the midst of barbarians. This might have earned it an equally slow and smooth adjustment to the changing times, and an equally harmonious synthesis of eastern and western elements. But it was not so: Genoa was captured one century later by a return of Lombard aggression, and plunged into the rustic atmosphere of feudal and pre-feudal Europe. She was harrassed by the Arabs, and had to make her own breakthrough anew by force of arms. There is a hardness in the Genoese character, and in the dialect, political life, manner of conducting affairs, and even, strangely enough, in the background of its hills, almost a starkness, which are different from the softening sweetness of the Venetian temper, with its singing dialect, willingness to compromise, and with the flat extent of the lagoons.

Genoa was and is a city of enduring friendships, but also of implacable feuds, the city of individualism in an extreme form, and of revolutions. Allow me to recall with a certain amount of pride, as I am a Genoese, that the last successful popular uprising

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to succeed in Europe took place ten years ago in Genoa's central square, where the dockers, armed with grapnels, and the intellectuals supplied with medieval paving-stones by a Doria who turned black sheep—he became both a radical and an historian—forced an unmitigatedly conservative government to resign. This was quite within the tradition of the city that had given to nineteenth-century liberalism Mazzini and some of his most ardent followers, and in the eighteenth century had conjured up the mischievous, obscure urchins who ousted an Austrian army with a hail of stones. It is no exaggeration to say that in the Middle Ages the Genoese averaged one street battle every two years. From the top of their private towers the gentleman-merchants of the twelfth century kept watch over each other, starting a fight from every storey whenever provoked. In turn the rich burghers of the fourteenth century dared exclude the older families from political offices, without, however, renouncing their own feuds. Then the populace of the sixteenth century rose again and again, frustrating the attempts of local lords and foreign rulers who would harness the recalcitrant city. And when, at long last, two *coups d'état* by Andrea Doria halted the quarrels between powerful families long enough for them to organize a stable oligarchical government, these families soon saw to it that the Doge (elected not for life, as in Venice, but for a period of only two years) had little more than decorative functions.

In Venice, the state was the pride of the whole population, who identified themselves entirely with its fortunes. With his paw raised majestically over the open book, the lion of Saint Mark promised peace not only to the Evangelist, but also to all those who came with good intentions. Peace, but not equality; even under the most liberal of regimes the citizens of the Middle Ages would not have dreamed of going against the wishes of the Lord who, it was believed, had created men unequal in order to compensate them better after death. A text dating from 971, which records the most ancient minutes of a parliament that has come down to us, graphically shows the Doge, Patriarch, and bishops seated, and the rest of the population standing, divided into the three orders of superiors, middle, and lower; but everyone takes part, and the unanimous decision is sealed by a common oath. The centuries which followed

increased the number of grades, and made movement from one to another increasingly difficult, but in this way it consolidated each one's position, and as we have said, left no-one without some reason to congratulate himself over his share in the community. The list of noble families entitled to aspire to the highest government posts was increased in 1297 by the admission of several "*case nuove*" recently become wealthy but remained henceforth almost hermetically sealed. Only in the seventeenth century the financial distress caused by the Candian war forced the government to sell patents of nobility. New blood was indeed needed, since the old stock were no longer contributing enough children to the republic, but the practice was not continued. I was told by old Venetians that some fifty years ago the few surviving descendants of the 1297 nobility still spoke with contempt of the "Candian upstarts." Yet Daniele Manin, who cast a last ray of glory over Venice in 1849, as the president of a revolutionary republic, was not the son of the last noble Doge whose family name he bore, but the son of a converted Jew of whom that Doge (Lodovico Manin) had been the godfather.

On the other hand, certain charges that entailed no political power but were honorable and well paid remained open to people who were not noble. Moreover, it was privilege enough to be listed a citizen "*intus et foris*" (within and without), that is, one allowed to take part in the economic life both at home and abroad on equal footing with the nobility. A citizen "within" but not "without" (usually a native of the Venetian territory but not of Venice proper, or a partly naturalised alien) was free in his commerce within Venice but had to go through an intermediary for his relations with the Venetian colonial empire. An ordinary native of the territory still benefited from the order and protection extended to all subjects by Venice but underwent further restrictions in trade. A peasant had no share in the commercial and industrial opportunities of the city. Yet he, like the citizen, remained faithful to Venice at her moment of trial, when three quarters of Europe coalised against her in the League of Cambrai between 1508 and 1511. At that period, while the other Italian states were crumbling through the indifference of their subjects, the Republic of Saint Mark alone preserved her pride and prestige in the face of the great European monarchies. She did more: in the age when the Turks were destroying one

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Christian kingdom after another, humiliated Peter the Great, and laid siege to Vienna, the Venetian republic, scarcely more than one city against a colossal empire, sent a challenging fleet under the walls of Istanbul, surrendered one fortress only to entrench herself in another, and managed to save a few shreds of her Greek and Balkan possessions down to the end. These military and political achievements were the fruit of the same perseverance that was displayed on another front: Venice's everyday war against the rivers that threatened to silt up the lagoon and the tides that battered at the outer sea-walls. No doubt in the end Venice became softer: in the eighteenth century, the liveliness of a Goldoni, a Guardi, or a Vivaldi could hardly conceal the decrepitude of the navy, commerce, and institutions. But growing old gracefully was not impossible in a city which pioneered in social security by providing pensions for arsenal workers who were disabled by age or illness.

Let us proceed with our comparison. In Genoa people regarded the state not as the sum of common citizens' interests, but rather as an enemy to be eluded or a prey to be conquered. It was chronically indigent because the citizens evaded taxes and refused to hike them according to need. This, however, did not prevent them from bidding to farm a tax, but the price they offered was usually low enough to amount to appropriation of public funds. As a result, Genoa could not get together, except for very short periods, such large fleets as the resources of her citizens could have warranted; indeed, many military expeditions affecting the most vital public interests had to be entrusted to private companies which underwrote all costs and risks but collected all profits. Elsewhere, the state tends to grow stronger as the Middle Ages yield to early modern times; in Genoa, its authority becomes weaker. In the thirteenth century it was still possible for the government to assemble an imposing number of ships at a short notice by forbidding commercial navigation and drafting sailors and merchantmen; but in the sixteenth, the Genoese shipowners from whom the king of Spain hired his best ships had no qualms in leaving their own city unprovided, and the republic could not force them to comply. Much the same can be said about taxation. In the thirteenth century the "captain of the people" (head of the republic), William Boccanegra, managed for the last time to redeem the taxes which his

predecessors had farmed out to themselves at bargain prices; it is true that the farmers' families soon after got even by over-throwing him. By the sixteenth century, not only most taxes but also the larger part of the Genoese colonies had been surrendered to the administration of the San Giorgio bank, an association of the tax farmers and creditors of the state.

If the dragon of Saint George, emblem of the Genoese republic, had been provided with an open book like that of the lion of Saint Mark, the inscription might well have been Guizot's motto, "*Enrichissez-vous*" (enrich yourselves). And yet Guizot's dictum, if one reads it in its entirety, was not too cynical: "Enrich yourselves by work and thrift," he said. Indeed these are the most common virtues to be found in Genoa, sometimes taken to an extreme of stinginess over time and money. Nevertheless, the Genoese are not at all bereaved of patriotism, pride, and civic spirit. When it comes to endowing hospitals, churches, and public works in the port, they give unsparingly the money they hide from the tax collectors, sometimes resorting to the stratagem of masking a magnificent mansion by a dilapidated façade. When Christopher Columbus wanted to give to his country a percentage of his revenue from the Indies, he offered it not to the state but to the administrators of the Saint George bank.

The republic had been born a commune, that is, not a permanent, abstract state that would transcend individual citizens, but a temporary covenant for the protection of specific interests of individual citizens. It never went far beyond that stage of development. In the oldest allegiance pledges of the citizens, one does not meet with such a crisp hierarchy as in the Venetian parliament minutes of 971. The twelfth-century Genoese consuls who lead the state as the Doge leads Venice are distinguished from the other members of the communal covenant only by their greater responsibility. The other social groups, listed almost in bulk, comprise anyone who could and would play a part in the commune in proportion to his ability and means. No doubt there was a circle of families who handed down wealth and position from father to son, but the circle was open to the newly enriched. It was only recognised officially as a noble class by a decree of the fourteenth century... which excluded the nobles from political office. Later on, as if in a return to the original spirit

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of the communal covenant, all people who wanted to have a say in political and economic affairs formed coalitions of families (*albergbi*), each of which at the beginning included both nobles and commoners. Lastly, in the sixteenth century, an oligarchy resembling the Venetian government elite of 1297 took over the monopoly of the higher offices; but it was still permissible for any citizen to buy a place in the oligarchic group in return for a moderate sum—an excellent investment, for the oligarchs were exempted from many taxes. Even citizenship was in the reach of all comers. Whereas in Venice twenty-five years residence was the minimum requirement for applying for naturalisation, in Genoa an alien could obtain immediate naturalisation provided he declared that he accepted all the obligations as well as the rights of a citizen. Moreover, it was not necessary to be a citizen to take part in commerce inside Genoa or to be enrolled in an artisans' guild. To conclude, in the eyes of the Genoese the republic is not so much a nationalistic symbol as something like a business partnership. They have not changed their outlook too radically, and the partnership is still doing good business today.

With such contrasting notions about the functions of a commonwealth, Venice and Genoa must obviously have acted and reacted in different ways. Genoa is at the same time more grasping and more open. Both in their own colonies and in the other parts of the world where they took their restless talents, the Genoese earned respect for their dynamism and usually for their honesty, but they have seldom been loved (except, one hopes, by the foreign women they have not hesitated to marry). Several families on Chios and Madeira are of Genoese origin but their ancestors were hated for a long time, as oppressors of the poor, and exploiters of the rich; people forgot easily that they brought orange-trees to Chios and sugar-cane to Madeira. There is, on the other hand, a more indulgent, even nostalgic remembrance of the paternalistic rule of Venice in Greece and Dalmatia; in the past, cultured people affected to speak Venetian, and the recent shadow of the Mussolinian nightmare is already wearing out. However, if the Venetians did bring peace and a sound administration to their domains, they did not do much to speed up their economic development. In the same way, in the interior, Venice made much of the northern merchants, charmed the intellectuals and tourists, but was careful to keep them separate

from its intimate life and sea-trade; the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, which was splendid with the frescos by Giorgione and Titian, and covered in marble, acted as a gilded prison just as much as a meeting place. Genoa, on the other hand, did not court foreigners, but accepted them as partners without difficulty, if they had something to contribute. And just as they did not refuse to let them take part in world trade, so they did not refrain from doing so either.

Which is the best formula? Is one better than the other? Both of them achieved success, as the history of these two rival sisters proves. To those accustomed to the political dialogues between Democrats and Republicans in America, the resemblances between the Genoese formula and Republican policies, and between the Venetian formula and Democratic policies will not escape notice.