

A HISTORY OF VENICE

(JOHN JULIUS NORWICH)

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This long but smoothly written book, by the very recently deceased John Julius Norwich, scion of English nobility, covers more than a thousand years of Venetian history. Nowadays Venice is mostly known as an overloaded tourist destination, or as a victim of environmental degradation, rather than as the world power it was for most of its history. Norwich, who loved the city and talks in detail not only about its past but also its architecture, often tying the two together, ably restores the place of Venice in history. And in so doing, he manages to both be interesting and to show us viable alternatives to the dead end into which “liberal democracy” has led us.

Venice is very old, though not as old as the rest of settled Italy—its origins only go back to the late Roman empire, since a group of islands in a lagoon, lacking much in the way of agriculture and having no minerals, is not an obvious place to settle. It might make a good place for hunter-gatherers in the James C. Scott mold, although it’s pretty cold in the winter, but as the heart of a civilization, at first glance the location’s costs outweigh the benefits. As with so many city foundings, the initial impulse to overcome those drawbacks was war—the very early Venetians, probably in the sixth century, settled the lagoon as refugees from the barbarian hordes overrunning the (western) Roman Empire. Venice was both out of the way and difficult to get to, protected by water, so it was a logical place to go to avoid barbarians spreading over land, who were attracted to existing concentrations of wealth and to substantial farmland. Whatever the precise outline of its founding, which naturally is shrouded in myth, the city only emerges into history in the eighth century, with the election of the first doges.

Other than canals and gondolas (as I read this book, my daughter kept asking, “have you gotten to the part about the gondolas?”), what most people know of Venice is the office of doge. At a casual glance, it seems like a type of monarchy, but that is completely wrong. The office was originally modelled, apparently, on that of the Byzantine exarch, or imperial administrator of Italy, who sat in Ravenna (though that office ended with Lombard conquest in 751). From early on, however, the

doge was elected, and the office was constrained by various devices to limit the doge's power. This is one of the major themes of Norwich's book—the obsession of the Venetians with controlling the power of the doge, such that he not become a monarch, much less a hereditary monarch, which in practice over the centuries resulted in the doge becoming more and more a figurehead. During more than a thousand years there is a lot of variation in any political system, so no doubt much of what Norwich discusses is summary, but to me Venetian political structure was the most fascinating part of this book, and the office of doge was only one part of that structure, and in many ways the least important part.

Technically Venice at its founding was part of the Eastern Roman Empire, which theoretically ruled all of northern Italy at the time, and in fact Venice defeated an attempt in the early ninth century by Charlemagne to occupy the city, as Byzantine power in the West fell away. In practice, though, the city was always largely autonomous, maintaining for a long time its early cordial relationship with the Byzantines (including, crucially, trade privileges in Constantinople), and throughout its entire history engaged in one balancing act after another with respect to its neighbors. What made Venice unique was commerce. Without significant landholdings (at least until much later), wealth, and therefore power, derived primarily from trade. Originally, the key product was locally produced salt formed by controlled evaporation, but types of trade goods quickly expanded, given the pivotal position of Venice as a protected enclave, centrally located and closely tied to Byzantium.

Trade not only made Venice rich, but formed its entire political system. The aristocracy that came into being in the city differed from all other Italian aristocracies, as well as from the broader European aristocracies. Venetians had less interest in war for aggrandizement, much more interest in stability, and considerably more appreciation for the common good. As Norwich says, "In Venice there was no separate military caste; the nobles were merchants, the merchants noble, and the interests of both were identical." This produced stability (although far from perfect stability, especially in the early years) and the creation of a magnificent city, as aristocrats spent, like the ancient Greeks, to benefit their fellow citizens and memorialize themselves. Moreover, tight geography and city living meant everyone important knew, more

or less, everyone else important, and therefore trust was high, a benefit reinforced by constant commercial interaction among the populace. Thus, feudalism had no role in Venice, both because of its circumstances and because of its Byzantine backdrop (feudalism did not exist under the Eastern Roman Empire), unlike in the rest of Italy, with its Frankish and Norman sensibilities and customs. (A further part, and perhaps not a small part, of Venetian stability was that the Venetians appear to have been very long-lived. Norwich claims that even today their life span is longer than other Italians, and most of the doges were elected in their seventies and served into their eighties or even their nineties.)

In the beginning, it was the vote of all the citizens that elected the doge, directly, and also declared war. The early Venetian constitutional system also contemplated the doge being advised by counsellors, whom the doge was required to consult, and the doge having the right to call the assembly of the people to vote. But by the late twelfth century, the doge tended to ignore the counselors, and there were so many citizens it was impractical to call an assembly, not to mention that such assemblies tended to degenerate into riotous, demanding mobs. Thus, the Great Council was created—originally 480 prominent citizens, nominated by representatives of city districts, and holding office for one year. The Great Council in turn appointed the officers of the state (who were required to accept the honor, since many did not want the unprofitable burden), and also the representatives of the city districts, thus “after the first year, when these representatives were elected democratically, they and the Great Council, each nominating the other, formed a closed circle which completely excluded the general populace from any say in their composition.” The election of the doge was also changed to be done by eleven electors chosen by the Great Council, to be “confirmed” by the people, and the number of counselors to the doge, and their power to check his actions, was increased. Moreover, starting at this point, the accession oath of the doge became a real check on his power, constantly revised to address perceived inadequacies and hemming him around with specific, substantive restrictions. All this was aimed at preventing the doge from accruing power and the masses from causing trouble.

This structure, complicated enough, became even more complicated over time, especially in the election of the doge, the potential distortion of whose office was perceived as a major threat to the Republic. (The

doge's election involved multiple rounds of selecting electors who selected other electors, with a large random element, and included features like an assigned man going out and grabbing the first boy he found to pull numbers from a hat.) For republic was what Venice was, for more than a thousand years, in the old meaning of republic—a mixed government, containing elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Over time, the aristocratic elements became stronger, while the democratic elements became weaker, but until its end, Venice remained a true republic. This process was ongoing—for example, other bodies were added in the fourteenth century, notably the Council of Ten, a body that worked in concert with the doge and his six councilors and had very significant authority, especially in areas of national security, but whose authority was hedged around with checks. These included terms of only one year and not more than one member from any given family at a time, and a rotating three-member leadership—for a month at a time, during which they were confined to the doge's palace to prevent the access of those who might bribe or coerce them. The Council of Ten could also temporarily expand their numbers, thereby giving greater heft to their decisions. All together these bodies formed a coherent whole, flexible enough to respond to crises, but broad enough not to be captured by factions and to make the common good their prime goal.

What was originally a republic weighted toward the democratic element became, as Venice grew in power and wealth, a republic weighted toward the aristocratic element. In 1299, in the *Serrata* or “Lock-Out,” membership in the Great Council, theoretically the supreme body of the state, was formally and permanently restricted to those whose families had held office during the past four years, along with a few others earlier holding office. This list was later called the Golden Book—all those citizens eligible for election. Norwich notes that this occasioned little unhappiness among those denied membership, then or later, even among the middle-upper stratum no longer eligible for the Council, the *cittadini* (“citizens”), whom Norwich analogizes to the Roman equestrian order. These were not powerless—the Grand Chancellor, for example, an extremely important office more powerful than the doge, was required to be held by one of the *cittadini*. Thus, the *cittadini* became a bulwark to, rather than an opposition to, the oligarchical system, and being a Venetian citizen a much sought-after position by those outside the

city who had dealings with it. Not to mention that the Great Council was, by the *Serrata*, expanded to more than 1,500 men, representing a broad cross-section of Venice and therefore quite representative—not democratic, but democracy in the modern sense is not at all necessary for a representative state, of course, as long as the aristocracy is broad enough and has the requisite virtue.

All these changes were organic and slow. Part of Venetian stability was their adherence to tradition—for example, the tradition lasting until the sixteenth century that each new doge give a present of wild birds to numerous people in government, replaced ultimately by special coins minted for the occasion, because birds had decreased while recipients increased—an early nod to environmental sustainability while maintaining tradition. It was not just ceremonial traditions that were maintained; you do not ever find the Venetians adopting new structures based on ideology or some new form of thought.

Early Venice was famed for the ease with which any person could participate in trade, by forming a *colleganza* (or *commendata*), where anyone with some money could form a limited liability entity (not a partnership, which implies unlimited liability for the participants) with a merchant, generally a young, aggressive one looking to make his name, and share the profits through a recognized legal form. This is what is known today as “default rules,” such as corporation law, making it easy for people to form businesses, knowing that the law provides reasonable rules that they do not have to re-invent, or even fully understand, to be adequately protected. And Venice always had relatively low taxation, very low in the early years of its glory. Most taxation was in the form of customs duties and other levies on trade, but in times of need, forced loans from the nobility, usually in the form of a small percentage of income (e.g., in 1313, a one-time tax of three percent on income—we should be blessed with such taxation). All this together meant ever-increasing amounts of capital in the city—after all, the recipe for economic success isn’t that hard, it’s just envy that, in most societies, eventually corrodes systems where real wealth is generated—and while doubtless the Venetians were subject to the vice of envy, they never let it dictate public policy. So Venice grew in wealth and power. From the thirteenth century onwards, Venice expanded into an imperial power, dominating not only the Adriatic, but large sections of northern Italy and the Dalmatian coast,

Istria, Illyria, and parts farther south, as well as much of the Aegean. And, for a time, large parts of the Byzantine Empire, although she gave those up soon enough, finding them more trouble than they were worth.

For most of their history, the Venetians occupied an ambiguous position with respect to Islam, with whose adherents they had dealings since their earliest times. Muslims were good trading partners, and Venice's control of the eastern Mediterranean was not significantly threatened until the 1400s. Thus, the Venetians looked at the Crusades with a jaundiced eye, willing enough to be paid to help transship Crusaders and to obtain trading rights and privileges in Outremer, and in the Fourth Crusade, to participate in sacking and looting Constantinople, but not committed to put the boot on Islam, had that even been possible. Norwich, unfortunately, continues the Gibbon/Runciman tradition, rooted in anti-Catholicism and Enlightenment stupidity and sophistry, of seeing the Crusades as a whole as "one of the blackest chapters in the history of Christendom," when in fact they were heroic and awesome. True, they were subject to the foibles of man and fate, and nobody would defend the Fourth Crusade's result—it should have been directed against Islam, and that it was not, was wholly the fault of the Venetians. Norwich is also subject, to a limited degree, to the modern disease of highlighting Christian bad behavior upon the storming of cities, while ignoring or downplaying identical Muslim behavior, which was regarded as entirely normal up until the modern era. Although he buys into propaganda about the Crusades, Norwich at least rejects the equally discredited idea that Venice was a proto-totalitarian police state, a favorite trope of Enlightenment writers, and part of the Black Legend. Certainly, the organs of the state sought out subversives, but the prisons were mostly empty most of the time, and Venice probably had a lighter touch than most governments of the Renaissance. But none of this looms large in the book—just in my mind, since I am looking out for these things, being touchy on the subject of historical illiteracy.

What made Venice's republican system work was the willing adoption of great responsibility by great men, or at least those charged with greatness. Luck and geography helped, too—other Italian city states, such as Genoa, were republics as well, but their position on the mainland meant they were more subject to attack from the outside, and turmoil sooner or later resulted in the imposition of some form of autocracy. It

has become fashionable nowadays to believe that Venice declined when the democratic elements of the republic became less, though of course it was never a democracy in the modern sense, even in the earliest times. (The imprecise use of the word “democracy” is a major cause of inanity in today’s political discourse.) For example, Daron Acemoglu’s and James A. Robinson’s not-very-good *Why Nations Fail* claims that Venice declined after 1300, because of the increase in oligarchic power and because the *colleganza* was banned. Their conclusion is that the aristocrats wanted to extract the juice produced by everyone else, and they killed the golden goose by the *Serrata*. This shallow reading of history has been picked up by other under-informed pundits, such as Jonah Goldberg in *Suicide of the West* and Chrystia Freeland in *Plutocrats*, and appears to be gaining ground among the chattering neoliberal classes.

But that Venice declined after 1300 is objectively false; as Norwich makes clear, thus giving the lie to Acemoglu’s entire theory. Actually, Venice continued along its sparkling path; the height of Venice’s power was nearly two hundred years after the *Serrata*. What initiated Venice’s decline had nothing to do with its internal political, or economic, arrangements. Rather, it was the opening of the Cape of Good Hope route to Africa in 1499, eliminating the Venetian hold over much Eastern commerce, and even more the expansion of the Ottomans after 1453, who ended Venetian commercial dominance. It did not help that Venice lost her mainland possessions, and also came out on the losing end in mainland battles, such as the wars against the League of Cambrai, composed of basically “everyone not Venice.” It is probably true that ending arrangements like the *colleganza* ultimately harmed the Venetian economy, but given Venice’s dominance of the entire Mediterranean trade until around 1500, there is no direct line. While I know little about the details, it seems to me that Venetian state subsidy and regulation of trade (including turning certain lucrative trades, such as the triangular trade in Greek wine, English wool, and Flemish woolens, into state monopolies), while still encouraging it, may have been a better strategy for dominance than ad hoc arrangements that may have made more sense when Venice was not a hegemon in its area. Norwich, at least, thinks that state regulation and subsidy of work like shipbuilding, especially given the military overlay, was beneficial. There appears to have been little regulation of the rent-seeking type, benefiting one set

of individuals over another; regulation was directed at strengthening the state. That said, increased taxation to feed increased bureaucracy must have led to increased scleroticism over time; doubtless there was some accumulating drag on the system—but wealth can alleviate that problem to some extent, as long as virtue in the governing class remains.

So Venice was extremely stable over centuries, and it had an inclusive governmental system that, most critically, offered the rule of law at all times and all places within its ambit. But neither stability nor the rule of law prevent the erosion of virtue that tends to afflict the wealthy and secure, even if Venice managed to stave off decay longer than most. (They were helped in keeping their virtue by, ironically, the need to strive against the agents of their economic ruin, the Ottoman Turks.) Decline in virtue caused the decline of the state and the society, as shown most notably by the lack of decisiveness of the government, due to an unwillingness to demand sacrifices of either the aristocracy or the people, combined with increasing corruption, all plunging Venice downwards to a degree unthinkable to the Venice of, say, 1400. “Wealth had led to luxury, luxury to idleness, and idleness to inertia, even when the state itself was threatened.” Evasion of the law, and disrespect for it, most of all by the powerful, became the norm, always a sign of a decaying society, as it was in the late Roman Republic.

This is the oldest story in the civilizational book, so it is no surprise, even if today this inevitable chain is rejected by some historians in favor of silly fantasy narratives of exploitation or emancipation. Yes, the Venetians and the Holy League managed to triumph in the critical 1571 Battle of Lepanto, heroically, over the Turks. But as Norwich says, this did not save Venice, or permanently undermine the Ottomans (although unlike today’s historians, who tend to be Muslim fanboys, he clearly notes the setback it posed to the Ottomans, dependent as they were on Western technology and skill to operate their battle fleets, such that for more than a hundred years the Ottomans studiously avoided naval engagements). Still, Lepanto gave an important moral boost to the Venetians, who were close to the end of their rope, enabling them to survive for another two centuries as an independent state. It did not, however, reverse the downward slide in virtue, so at the end, Venice was as easily plucked by Napoleon (in 1797) as an overripe apple.

It is important to remember that being opposed to democracy, as I am, does not imply indifference to the powerless. The entire history of Venice shows that what the mass of people want is not, unless they have been ideologically indoctrinated, democracy as the main element in government. As long as their interests are in some way adequately represented, what they want is what Venice gave them: stability, justice, rule by those who actually cared for them, pride in their community, and the chance for advancement for themselves and their children. That Venice offered that for more than a thousand years, and our far more democratic system lasted less than 150 years, at most, before beginning to decay, should suggest that democracy has little or nothing to offer—even if we ignore that all political thought before the modern era came to this same commonsense conclusion. That said, I suspect that a society where the aristocratic, rather than the monarchical, element is the most powerful is not a winning combination except in specific circumstances such as that of Venice, namely those of a particular type of geography and focus. Regardless, our goal should be, and my goal is, replacing our current system with an organic, non-ideological system based on historical precedent, and Venice offers a lot of food for thought in that regard.