

'In Place of Strife' - The Guilds and the Law in Renaissance Venice

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The trade guilds of Venice, explains Richard Mackenney, were organisations with a surprising amount of political and economic power in the patrician Renaissance city.

For some time, guilds have been an unfashionable subject and tend to be identified with economic obsolescence and political passivity. They existed to protect those who practised a common trade, to maintain the standards of the craft and to express the solidarity of members through conviviality and the provision of support for guildsmen and their families. Such corporate organisations became increasingly common in the thirteenth century and were the products of economic growth in that period. By the sixteenth century, so the textbooks say, their exclusiveness and their monopolistic tendencies made them enemies of growth in an expanding economy. In England, guilds began to disappear by the end of the seventeenth century. Elsewhere, especially in France, their existence was artificially continued by governments which found them convenient for purposes of taxation.

On the face of it, the guilds of Venice would seem to embody economic introversion and political feebleness. As is well known, Venetian economic strength derived from the commercial enterprise of the patriciate in overseas markets. The city's craft guilds had no part to play – except to build ships – in this branch of economic life: perhaps because of their distant markets and interests in maritime commerce, the merchants of Venice did not form corporations like the merchant guilds which existed elsewhere. Their economic interests were safeguarded by Venice's governmental institutions, which the merchants controlled, rendering other mercantile organisations superfluous.

The Venetian patriciate dominated political life as they dominated the economy. The Venetian constitution – which came to be so admired – ensured the predominance of a tightly defined oligarchy whose composition was strictly fixed at the end of the thirteenth century. From that time onwards, only members of certain families could hold office and be members of the Great Council and the Senate, only they could become magistrates, only they could elect the nominal head of government, the Doge. The Venetian constitution gave noblemen a democracy amongst themselves: the common people were strictly excluded from political life. Ordinary folk were permitted to form guild organisations and the government found these useful in regulating economic life in the city itself. Despite their exclusion from politics, the people seem to have remained content. There was no popular uprising in Venice from the 'closing' of the Great Council to all except the adult males of certain families in 1297 to the fall of the Republic to Napoleon precisely five hundred years later.

This remarkable record of stability was perhaps the main reason that the Venetian constitution became the envy of other states. But can we attribute half a millennium of stability

solely to the wise government of the patricians? In the second half of the sixteenth century, the population of Venice stood at about 150,000: as few as 2,000 eligible for governmental office, as many as 120,000 either artisans or their dependents. One might have expected that at some point in a period of five hundred years, high food prices or military defeat would have spurred some guildsmen to riot or rebellion, yet they remain almost entirely anonymous in Venetian history.

In the early seventeenth century, there were about 120 guilds in the city. These represented an enormous range of trades in the state shipyards, in the textile and construction industries and, perhaps most important of all, in an ever-expanding retail sector. It is difficult to ignore altogether such large numbers of people engaged in such a substantial slice of a city's economic life and if we look a little more closely, we can see that the guilds played a more positive and active role in Venice than is usually imagined.

Certainly, their political position was a subordinate one. That subordination was effected in the later thirteenth century. Elsewhere in Italy, the 'little people' sought – and often won – political recognition from urban oligarchies. The Venetian experience was different. There was a flourish of popular celebration and an exuberant procession by the guilds when Lorenzo Tiepolo was elected Doge in 1268, but any suggestion that the guilds might have been on the verge of a political breakthrough had already been scotched. Laws which bound all guildsmen to the state by oath of allegiance had been formulated in 1265 and were hammered remorselessly into guild statutes in the 1270s. Everyone's workmate became a potential informer and guild officers, who in some cases were chosen by the magistrates and not by members, were clearly expected to represent the government in the guilds rather than vice versa.

There was not a murmur of protest from the corporations, even when the effectiveness of the city's constitutional arrangements was tested in the tempestuous fourteenth century. Indeed, during the abortive coup by the patrician Baiamonte Tiepolo in 1309, the painters rallied to the government cause and saw off an armed band of rebels on the Campo San Lucca. In 1355, the Arsenal workers who were supposed to be in league with the traitor-Doge Marin Falier never moved a muscle and the old man was beheaded before most Venetians were aware he had been arrested.

Turning to guild economic life, we find, on the surface, the same picture of stability through government control. The Venetians were perhaps fortunate that there was no major woollen industry in the city in the middle ages for this may have avoided the kind of tensions between merchants and producers which erupted in Florence. In 1378, the Tuscan city was shaken to its foundations by an uprising of the lowest paid workers in the cloth industry – who were in fact denied the right to associate in guilds. Moreover, in Venice, the law of contract made it virtually impossible for guildsmen to take on more work than they could handle and supplies of raw materials were organised so that every master took a share. Within the Venetian guild system, it is difficult to see how a cartel of wealthy entrepreneurs could make a large number of workers dependent on their capital.

Significantly, this seems to have encouraged the development of a wide variety of guild organisations, characterised by very loose internal organisation, especially in a strikingly diverse and open-ended retail sector. The guilds of Venice were remarkable for the variety of their activities, many of which, as shown in the accompanying illustrations, were celebrated in the portals of St. Mark's and on the columns of the ducal palace. Virtually any activity, from sand carrying to mercery, from goldsmithery to dormouse skinning, was permitted a guild organisation. There was no division (as in Florence) between 'Greater' and 'Lessex' guilds

and apparently no dependent proletariat who were outside the guilds altogether. The metropolitan economy of Venice was built on guilds of craftsmen and shopkeepers, not on entrepreneurs and wage labourers.

To summarise: medieval Venice had a large number of guilds whose economic status was roughly similar. The variety of their activities may have acted to fragment any sense of common interest in opposition to the patrician state which was able to render the corporations politically impotent. There was – and this is strange in a city so wary of individual assertiveness – an important compensation for guild members. Each guildsman pledged his loyalty to the state but there was a reciprocal arrangement, a species of social contract, in matters of justice.

The first Venetian artisan we know by name is almost certainly Giovanni Sagorino, a blacksmith mentioned in a chronicle of (probably) the twelfth century recording the events of the year 1030. Giovanni had been told to carry out labour services for the Doge – as many artisans were required to do – at the ducal palace. He told the official who issued the order that the work could be done perfectly well in his shop. The dispute went to arbitration and the court found in favour of the artisan and, in effect, against the Doge.

The tradition continued even when the guild system was fully developed, though the right of appeal was more commonly exercised by an individual against the guild's officers than against the state. In the mid-fifteenth century, Pancrazio the baker was fined fifty ducats by his guild and took the case to three courts before he won his appeal and had the fine annulled. This was an important safeguard, especially when one remembers that the individual's right of appeal was authorised by the very statutes which rendered the corporations politically powerless. In Florence or Bologna, where the guilds were apparently more important in political life, such a right was specifically denied. Elsewhere the sentence of guild officers was final. In Venice, opportunities for appeal played a vital part in the history of the guilds.

In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there developed a 'myth of Venice' – the myth of a perfect constitution designed to avoid social discord. The way in which conflict was at the same time acknowledged and sublimated by the existence of channels through which protest might be expressed suggests that the myth had a certain grounding in everyday reality. Perhaps Shakespeare was not so wide of the mark when he chose to set the climax of *The Merchant of Venice* in a court-room. Even a patrician like Gasparo Contarini who spoke of the commonalty as 'the very scum of the people' acknowledged that the Venetian system of justice was characterised by collective judgements in a wide variety of courts. No magistrate, he wrote in 1524 'should be an arbitrator without appeale in any thing'. How did Venice's famed stability survive economic and political change? By the end of the sixteenth century, the city was declining relative to other states. The disruption of, eastern markets by the Ottoman advance, the upheavals of the Italian wars which had brought France and Spain into the peninsula, and, though their impact was by no means sudden, the rise of economies which looked to the Atlantic rather than to Mediterranean routes, all threatened Venetian prosperity.

Those so-called enemies of progress, the guilds, played a crucial part in the process of adjustment and by 1600 it was clear that taxation, not guild obsolescence was hindering that process. Similar flexibility in the face of economic change has been brought to light in the construction industries of Renaissance Florence and indeed in the textile industries of Leyden and Lille in early modern times. What we know virtually nothing about – and where Venetian experience shows that guilds had a dynamism quite extraordinary in the pre-industrial world – is the history of shopping.

Today we take it for granted that the main street linking St. Mark's and Rialto is not dominated by banks or glass factories but by shops. Like the twentieth-century visitor, someone who went to Venice in the thirteenth century or the sixteenth would also have been besieged by people trying to sell him something – probably something he did not want – especially on the occasion of one of the city's great festivals, when Venice was packed with gullible outsiders. The street in question is the Merceria and it takes its name from the guild whose shops dominated the thoroughfare: the mercers.

In defiance of the rigid demarcation usually associated with guilds, Venetian mercers sold everything from amber to tin tacks, from buttons to perfume, from pots to brocade. In 1561, Antonio Valfredo set up at the *Citta di Milano* as a seller of belts, mercery, purses and hats, Giacomo Morando, bell-maker at the St Anthony, took on the Falcon as a mercer in 1567.

There appears to have been something for everyone in the guild's activities. A series of tax assessments of 1568 records that Zilio da Ponte had about 60,000 ducats tied up in mercery while Marc'Antonio the capper 'has nothing he can call his own and struggles to stay alive'. The likes of Marc'Antonio never became dependent on the likes of Zilio, however. By 1594, we can identify between 350 and 400 independent mercers' businesses in the city and a membership of just under a thousand. There were clearly considerable opportunities for casual employment – perhaps as a shelf-stocker or even a window-dresser – and we might hazard the speculation that sixteenth-century Venice was the home of Europe's first corner shops and general stores. Their shop signs survive down to the present day, though the *Aquila Negra*, the *Citta di Milano* and the *Madonna* are now smart restaurants, not mercers' shops.

The mercers stood at the centre of the city's economic life and of the guild network. In linking the worlds of international commerce and the corner shop, their activities provided the ligaments which enabled Venice to adjust to changed economic circumstances in the sixteenth century and to preserve the city's prosperity. The vitality of the retail sector and the wide variety of occupational opportunities within it helped ordinary Venetians to flourish even though there were some pointers to long-term decline.

A study of Venetian guilds shows that economic and political life within the corporations were inextricably linked. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the way in which the guilds' capacity for adjustment to change was hampered by the demands of the state. For, in the later sixteenth century, the government was forced to devote more and more of the city's resources to ever-increasing defence commitments. By this time, Venice stood in the shadow of two Mediterranean 'super-powers', the Ottoman Empire and Spain, and was trying to compete in a world in which the scale, duration and cost of warfare were all on the increase. The depredations of Turks and pirates forced the Venetians to double their reserve fleet in 1539, each of the hundred galleys requiring 156 oarsmen to produce its 19 horsepower. The crews were on more or less permanent stand-by, and the records suggest that tension was not relieved all that often by action at sea.

Men and money had to be found at regular intervals and the guilds were expected to help in supplying them. Men and money for wars which grew ever more expensive: the pattern of political necessity in republican Venice bears a striking resemblance to a state as remote in terms of size, geography and character as the France of Louis XIV.

The problem for the Venetians was that the war never reached a crisis point. For most of the sixteenth century, it was impossible to distinguish periods of declared war from periods of peaceful commerce. War was not a question of great victories and defeats, but a question of

wearing the enemy down. The drain on Venetian resources was severe. The triumph of the Holy League at Lepanto in 1571 when Catholic Christendom routed the infidel fleet changed nothing. The campaign cost Venice about 700,000 ducats. By 1594, with the problem of piracy worsening all the time, the Republic had to find almost 600,000 ducats merely to keep the fleet in readiness. In 1582, the guilds alone were expected to supply 120,000 ducats for the fleet – about one quarter of the total capital resources of the mercers' guild around the time of Lepanto.

The guilds, not surprisingly, began to murmur. The burden on each member had worsened since the fearful plague of 1575-7 which had reduced the population of the city by about one-third. Such a loss could only be made good by immigration from the mainland, but by the end of the century potential replacements were deterred by the level of taxes and the possibility of having to serve in the galleys.

As the relations between guilds and government grew strained, the legal position of the former became increasingly important. Corporately, as we have seen, the guilds had little chance of political expression. No conscious decision is recorded, but by about 1585 what seems to begin to happen is a kind of pooling of individual rights within each guild. From about that date, there are complaints from the guilds to the magistrates that business is bad and taxes axe making it worse. Demands for servicemen are too heavy and are starving the guilds of new members.

As early as 1578, some of the boatmen were grumbling about foreigners 'who can leave whenever there's a tax to pay' and the potters echoed the grievance. By 1611, the focal year of protest, some of the tanners had left the city 'running after work like birds after food', foreign workers among the goldsmiths and cabinet makers were also on the move and the bakers' journeymen had left the guild in the lurch since they were all 'northerners, Germans and outsiders who don't care where they are'.

Some of the wealthier guilds concentrated on the demeaning character of personal service at the oar. In 1594, merchants in the wool and silk guilds were exempted from personal service and were permitted to hire a substitute. Two years later the same privilege was extended to mercers and goldsmiths. The poor were expected to serve in person. The guilds never acted as one, but having moved away from the principle that all the corporations were equal before the law, the government found a tide of protest rising in waves from those who were expected to serve in person and those who felt that they should be exempted. In 1606, the leather merchants complained about being put on the same level as 'boatmen, oddjobbers and other manual trades of no standing', the goldsellers 'have nothing to do with artisan workmen'.

There are dozens of complaints about the government's exactions. They reached a climax in 1611-2 after heavy impositions in 1610. The blacksmiths' records are instructive about the moment of crisis. In 1612, they complained that seven years earlier their quota of oarsmen had been cut from 147 to 100 when the guild numbered 131 able-bodied masters, now the demand was 120 from only 98. The smiths complained that business had dropped by 80 per cent in recent years, though they did not point out that their fuel bill had risen sharply. A steep rise in the price of charcoal began in 1572 when tax accounted for 16 *soldi* out of the 44 paid for each basket and the amount of tax continued to rise for the next half century. Perhaps it is not all that surprising that some members took matters into their own hands, as it were, at a meeting of 1612. The guild's records show that:

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Further reading:

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