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here are no Venetians left in Venice. And this cannot only be blamed on the tourists who

overwhelm them and submerge the city just as the high tides that now and again renew widespread and well-established anxiety - a seasonal classic - for a city destined to sink and instead continues to remain cheerfully where it is (this alarm should be interpreted more as concern for the destiny of its artistic heritage than for its inhabitants).

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The Rialto market, 1961 photo Ferrigno

The blame - if Venice is an ensemble of “*uninhabited*” treasures - lies above all with authors, journalists, cinematographers and photographers. In stories and novels set in Venice one rarely comes across its real inhabitants. Goethe mentions them only to criticise their appalling habit of emptying rubbish into the canals. There is no trace of passers-by in the Turkish writer Orhan Pamukis’ recent wanderings through the *calle*, in the pleasure he experiences in getting lost in the Venetian labyrinth. Some even accuse the Venetians of “hiding from the tourists, depriving them of what should be the greatest wealth in visiting a city, a relationship with its residents.” The strange thing is that the author of these “thoughts,” Spanish journalist-philosopher Víctor Gómez Pin, won an award from the Venetian Institute of Science and Art.

And what about the figurative arts? One has to go back to the landscape painters of the 18th Century to see portrayals of the Venetian people. Canaletto himself, with his portrayals of Venice, of the San Marco basin filled with ships and fishing boats, would move on to paint still life and “*capricci*” during his exile in London. My friend Claudio Madricardo disagrees, and reminds me of painters like Ettore Tito, Giacomo Favretto, Antonio Ermolao Paoletti.



Pescheria, Ettore Tito



Caldarroste, Antonio E. Paoletti



Mercato S. Polo, Giacomo Favretto



Le lavandaie, Giacomo Favretto

Ok. Touché. Not so many though. And yes, there are great photographers who fill their Venetian images with locals. Of course, one must not forget the great Fulvio Roiter, the author of wonderful books filled with lively Venetians leading their daily lives, going to the market, to the boatsheds for gondolas and patronising haberdasheries. But today? The postcards that are currently sold are primarily images of corners and canals without a human being in sight. And the great events? They leave out the real city, they “use” it, and only exploit its human resources marginally.





Naturally Venice's citizens are proud of its uniqueness. Even those who live on dry land, in spite of the fact that they claim the identity of Mestre, make in know that they are Venetian, totally Venetian, as soon as they travel the world. One even hears of people from Padua or Treviso who, when travelling, say that they "come from Venice." And yet the Venetians know and perceive that they have been abolished. Their city still exists but they, the citizens, do not. They only seem to exist when they are elsewhere. If the accountant Mr. Tonin or Mrs. Zanin are in a railway carriage or in the waiting area of an airport, and people hear they are from Venice, they automatically become the representatives of their city. Then they are obliged to answer strange questions, such as "Do you have schools in Venice?" Then they become the magnet for the love and above all the hatred the city gives rise to. Perhaps this is because it is an enchanted place, but it is the most expensive city on the planet, filled with tourists, dirty and overrun with stalls and pigeons. The Venetians trapped in such a situation must account for the iniquities of a greedy and dishonest barman, the greedy gondolier, the excessively expensive water-bus and even the trash dropped by them, the tourists. And yet these questions reveal that there is not even the perception of a "normal" city, albeit a wonderful one, where most of those who live there do the same things as anyone else does in any other city.

Perhaps for the occasional visitor, one not necessarily distracted or naive, the Venetian remains the innkeeper, the gondolier, the hotelier, the seller of souvenirs or the barman. Someone who is in all events involved in something to do with the person's visit. And the others? Bothersome beings getting in the way of their suitcases while they are boarding the water-bus. It is

unthinkable that this should be a city with a life of its own, just like all other cities, with its inhabitants who are born, grow-up and die here keeping this city alive with their studies, their jobs, their businesses and their hobbies.



It is however true that Venetians are great grumblers, always muttering and complaining about things that do not work well (just like some of Goldoni's characters). If one enters a bar that the locals patronise, all one hears is *"ze sparìo anca l'ultimo former"*, *"no ti pol comprar gnanca un litro de late"* [even the last bakery has vanished...it's impossible to even buy a litre of milk] and so on. However, should a foreigner ["foresto"] say the same things, Venetians are instantly ready to defend their city saying that "no, this is not true. There are plenty of shops, it is just that you tourists do not know where they are. They are in districts you do not visit. Only we know where they are." Then they set off to shop in Marghera, repeating on their return bus journey that there are no longer any shops. When they travel, however, there is trouble for anyone who criticises

their city.



And yet Venice’s history is the glorious story of a people. This is a centuries-old story that appears to have stopped at the gateway to modernity. Modern times have left standing the city of the past and its treasures intact as in no other city. Time has slowly weakened its urban and social dimension, almost destroying it. “Veniceness” – writes the author Cesarina “Titti” Vighy – “is gold dust that miraculously rained down on Venetians in the days of the *Serenissima*, gold dust, that just like the one placed on the wings of captured butterflies, dissolved and vanished first with the *Dominante* crisis and then because of Napoleon’s betrayal. The gold dust contained pride, the desire to expand, great projects, but also an inflexible sense of justice. All qualities linked to *joie de vivre*, Levantine sensuality and an acerbic spirit.”

Why and how such a mutation took place is the object of a never-ending and exhausting debate. It is said that Venice has emptied out and has become a location for holiday homes, often left empty, or bed and breakfast accommodations. It is true that a significant part of the old city has moved to dry land, and it is true that the tourist economy is slowly consuming all other sectors. However, the historical centres of other Italian cities are suffering the same fate. They have emptied out and experienced a mass exodus to the suburbs. In Florence and Rome, as well in Prague, Budapest and Barcelona, there are many holiday homes owned by occasional visitors and the city centres have

become an immense open air bar and restaurant. No one, however, holds forth about a moribund Florence or Rome. And even industrial cities such as Turin and Genoa, thanks to de-industrialisation, have become tertiary and tourist urban centres with their historical hearts suffering the same fate as those in Rome and Florence. Of course Venice is a 'decentralised' historical centre, physically separated from its suburbs, which it considers an extraneous otherness. Elsewhere this is simply experienced as a new and modern part of the city, perhaps degraded, also distant, but not different. Perhaps this is also why the 90,000 people who still live in the districts of Venice such as Murano, Burano, the Lido, Pellestrina and the other islands of the Laguna, find it hard to see themselves living in the suburbs, on terra ferma, almost as if this means living in a different city in spite of the fact that Mestre is totally part of Venice, and all referendums held to try and separate it have failed.



Redentore (Fabrizio Olivetti)

The Venetians who resist are many if compared, for example to the *romani de' Roma [real Romans]*, a city that together with Venice boasts the largest historical centre in the world, in which not even one hundred thousand people actually live. Thirty years ago there were more in Trastevere alone. Whatever anyone may say, Venetians are sticking to their guns more than their counterparts in other historical Italian cities. Instead, it is said that they are irreversibly vanishing and that those who are still there are "improbable" presences.

Of course, for those who spend the best hours of their lives locked in a metallic box, it must be impossible to perceive even the existence of a real city, one without cars, where everyone walks or uses boats. A city of houses without lifts, in the middle of a lagoon and floating on the water. Yes, there is something inexplicable and unbelievable to foreigners in the stubborn and silent attachment Venetians have for their bizarre city.

There is also something heroic about their indestructible stubbornness to keep alive a city that bad literature insists on describing as forever in agony. And there is something absurdly unfair in not acknowledging them for the very existence of Venice. The city would really not even exist were it, as people say, just a museum or even another Disneyland.

Just like all beautiful Italian cities, and perhaps even more so, Venice has an incomparable chemistry of artistic and architectural beauty that merges with the lives of its inhabitants. The art treasures are the body, the inhabitants are the soul. If Pompeii and Ostia Antica have the appeal of

ancient history, Venice or Florence or Siena enchant visitors with history that continues in modern times.



(Fabrizio Olivetti)

Venice has more. Its history as a city on the water still exists in its inhabitants. Their relationship with the Lagoon and the sea is deep and authentic. One sees this in the innumerable boats, many of them rowing boats, moored along the canals and moving along them. There are forty-thousand boats of all kinds in the Lagoon, fifteen-thousand in Venice alone, requiring passion and devotion also during the winter. Not to mention the multitude of boats used for everything that in other cities involves cars and trucks (goods, fire fighters, police, Carabinieri, ambulances). What always amazes *foresti [strangers]* but also indicates the “modernity” of a city, is that Venice has been capable of integrating in itself, in its uniqueness, elements of speed and innovation that do however respect its geophysical peculiarities. Was it not Marinetti who wanted to asphalt the Lagoon so as to drive to San Marco? There is no need for this and, while Venice is characterised by an apparently slow pace, it is possible to do here all that is done elsewhere, and at times even faster.

And what about the high water phenomenon? This is a problem that sooner or later must be solved, and after lengthy controversies it seems that this will soon happen. In the meantime it really is not a problem. There are Wellington boots and shopkeepers move their goods to higher shelves. It is the water that has moulded their character. It is not just an element to be dominated or to enjoy. One tends to forget that Venetians are islanders, although they have continuously been in contact with the rest of the world, a large part of which they travelled in all directions and dominated, as well as trading intensely with it for a few centuries. They have the frugal and self-effacing temperament of islanders, at times brisk and diffident. In reality the Venetian community is extremely social in a manner that no longer exists elsewhere. This is probably because this is an entirely pedestrian city and made to measure for human beings with a clear local dimension. The district, the neighbourhood, is still extremely important in everyday life, in spite of intense internal mobility.



(drawings by Paolo Bertuzzo, "I giochi a Venezia", Marsilio, edited by Leopoldo Pietragnoli)

Those who choose to live in Venice know that today all this is of incalculable value. And, contrary to all those prophecies of a decline, there are many Venetians who have decided to remain here and care deeply about the future of their city. They know that theirs is the city of the future, not the other cities criss-crossed by motorways and dotted with glass skyscrapers, increasingly anonymous and all inhuman. Le Corbusier believed that Venetians, "as sailors and merchants, as the creators of cities and politicians, were the precursors of modern civilisation." In the eyes of this great architect, the division between the canal system and the pedestrian one, makes Venice a model and a prophecy for the cities of the future.

If in the future democracy comes to mean a high standard of living for the vast majority of people, in an eco-friendly and sustainable development system, then Venice will embody more than any other city that possible utopia. Industrious, far from the noise, safe, bright, benevolent and kind as

only communities without cars can be, it is a paradise for children and adolescents, for everyone. These are virtues that will be precious in our future and will be even more so if the world does not decide to change, placing the environment and its protection in first position. In Venice this already exists, those who live there already experience this, when tourism allows them to. If the rest of the world follows this example all the better, if not Venice will continue to be an island where life will be a great privilege.



@GuidoMolledo

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