

*versione italiana*

Two wake-up calls have come for Venice after two great “brushes with disaster”, on two summer Sundays, 30 years apart. 25 July 1989, after the Pink Floyd concert on the day of Redentore, which opened the eyes of the world to the effects of large crowds packed in to the city; and 2 June 2019, the day of the Sensa, the marriage with the sea, when a cruise ship lost control for the “first time” and damaged people and property. Two impressions accompanied these wake-up calls. The first is a sense of relief. There were “no deaths and no injuries”. It’s incredible if I think back, in the first case, to the mob on that evening at San Marco and the young people who climbed up the piping that thirty years ago “encircled” the Palazzo Ducale to watch the concert in the bacino from there. From that point of view it went great and we can joke about it, saying “oi ‘ndemo a veder i pin floi”.

And in the second case I think of what would have happened if the impact had happened at a different point or if the river boat had been crushed against the shore, or if a fire had broken out. The second impression involves some reflections about the destiny of the city and its lagoon. What we saw thirty years ago, the day after the concert in piazza San Marco, but also in the surrounding calli and campielle, helped to prevent the Expo 2000 that Gianni De Michelis wanted to bring to Venice. It was clear that bringing hundreds of thousands of people into the city all together would have resulted in a repeat of what we saw upon waking that 26 July 1989. It was one of the small battles won by those who by then saw the harmful effects of tourism in the distortion of the city (a Venice that “ignores poets and celebrates merchants [...] in the permanent exhibition of churches and palazzi”).

Today I hope that this “accident” can help get the cruise ships out of the Lagoon forever.

On Sunday 2 June 2019 the first images of the accident were already viral on social media by early morning. They led me to go and see it in person. And I found a spontaneous gathering of many Venetians. I believe they were stunned like me, almost astonished that what had been predicted had actually happened. They knew that “we predicted this”.

But to see it, even without irreparable damage, dismayed us, because the seriousness of this accident, which authorities immediately tried to downplay (look, we can even “contain” accidents) is absolute. The world has heard what happened firsthand what happened that day. In the audio available online we hear the pilot in his communications with the capitaneria di porto, and he speaks of a loss of contact between the bridge and the engine room due to a breakdown.

What is clear, then, is that these ships are neither safe nor controllable. And if they lose control, the inertia of tens of thousands of tonnage can sweep away whatever lies in its path: monuments

and palazzi, homes and people.



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Then we must consider that in evaluating the damages, we cannot stop only with the consequences which in this specific case were “miraculously limited” - the cement bank that somehow held. But had the impact been with a “normal” bank and not on one padded for a river boat? And the 110 people aboard the River Countess, who around 9 AM realized that the 65,000 tons of the MSC Opera - 275 meters long, 32 wide and 54 high - were coming straight for them, did they have time to think that they could end up crushed or burned? Miraculously there were only four mild injuries.

Behind them is the city. Some of the residents of Santa Marta, seeing this scene as they leaned out their balconies from windows on the higher floors, feared that the ship might impact their homes. We also need to think about the unseen consequences that go far beyond this accident, caused by the countless ship passages that are leaving a heavy impact on the city and the Lagoon.

The first consequence is pollution. The residents of the homes behind the Marittima station are systematically exposed to the pollution from engines that are always left running at the docks. On 2 June the ship stopped after the accident, and stayed there in front, but always strictly with motors running. Residents closed their windows, as they always do with each passing ship. Since 2008 Venice has recorded 502 dockings (according to data from VTP), with 1.6 million

passengers. The market for cruise tourism in Venice has generated revenue which according to Il Sole 24 has been calculated - by who? - at over 280 million Euro.

La Repubblica on 5 June 2019 reprinted a report that awards Venice the unenviable prize of having the most polluted port in Italy (and the third most polluted in all of Europe). This is caused directly by the cruise ships - the emissions from these giants of the sea are twenty times greater than that from automobiles.

The second consequence is the incompatibility between the great size of the cruise ships and the aquatic and morphological equilibrium of the lagoon. Nobody wants the ships to pass through the bacino di San Marco and the canale delle Giudecca. They talk about taking the ships to Marghera. Silvio Testa, the first to consider and write about the subject (*E le chiamano navi*, Corte del Fontego edizioni, 2011) reminds us from the pages of a local newspaper that this is not a solution. Not only would it require excavating (taking it back to its original depth) the canale Vittorio Emanuele, but it would also require excavating the Canale dei Petroli, as well as enlarging it and building shore walls: it's not a bad idea to recall that the "acqua granda" of 1966 happened one year after this canal's excavation brought part of the sea in to the Lagoon. The consequence of the excavation is the existence of two substantially separate aquatic basins in the Lagoon.

And let's also not forget that the Lagoon has a tide schedule which alternates between six hours of currents entering and six hours exiting. The result is that the sediment stirred up on the lagoon floor by the passage of the ships is carried out without any being brought back in. We are in a paradoxical situation of a lagoon that is seeing its floors deepened instead of naturally building them up.

These are not the only arguments that rule out the Marghera solution. There is the competition with water traffic related to current industrial and commercial uses. And the consequences of an accident, which we have seen is possible, would they be less relevant among oil tankers, porta-containers, commercial ships, and close to dangerous installations and deposits?

Finally, should the fate of what was an industrial city in the last century be rewritten by a tourism monoculture that has spread beyond Venice and begun to "consume" Mestre (with its new big hotels) and Marghera for the cruise ships?



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The first conclusion we can reach is very clear: the cruise ships should stay out of the Lagoon. June 2 2019 has demonstrated that we cannot allow these monsters with such explosive potential in our home. The myth of the technical capacity to control them and eliminate all risks has been exposed as, precisely, a myth. It is an irresponsible and deceptive narrative. It doesn't seem to me that we should wait for the next ship that loses control to sweep into piazza San Marco and the Palazzo Ducale or even only (!) destroys some homes in Giudecca or on the Zattere, or Riva degli Schiavoni. And we don't want to even talk about a collision between cruise ships and commercial ships in the access canals or the consequences of an impact on the docks of Marghera.

If there have to be cruise ships, they should remain outside the lagoon and the passengers can be brought to the city by the least polluting vehicles possible (electric). This is a plan that has been demonstrated many times to meet the needs of a necessary conversion of this sector, with an increase in jobs.

The second consideration that I would make is in invitation to rethink the model of cruise ship travel and more generally of tourism that the third millennium offers to Venice (and the world). Tiziana Plebani, historian, Venetian by adoption, resident of Santa Marta, which is just downwind of the cruise ships, has written eloquently on the subject:

"A change of mentality is essential to defeat the giants of the sea: an everything-included vacation,

June 2, day of the cruise ships. A point of no return

completely organized, food always available, places viewed from up high without any intention of knowing them better or taking the trouble to read a guide. It is a reality made of postcards, moments for taking selfies, an abduction of beauty and an environmental massacre.”

It's true.

“I don't know if it is popular but perhaps when we begin to say that there are those who have a different concept of vacationing, we will realize that there are not so few of us.”

And when we begin to forcefully say that we have a different concept of consumption, of society, of a city, maybe we will find that there are many of us. And that our number can grow when we speak clearly. But we must act soon, time is running out.

As I've tried to say in other essays, the main problem in Venice today seems to me to be the supremacy of tourism income over any other economic function. From the point of view of the expansion of this model, Venice is not “unique”. It is an - or perhaps “the” - paradigm that clearly demonstrates the impact of global tourism's aggression on the “delicate organisms” (monuments, architecture, environment) that make our country and our planet beautiful.



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The way out of this cannot be reached by us thinking of “who will help us”. Montanelli from the 1960s and 1970s was not enough. Today, Gianni Berengo Gardin, with his photographs that made such an impression on the world, nor Banksy with his irreverent paintings nor Celentano with his provocative films - none of these are enough. A great movement of culture and international

public opinion are necessary.

However there has to be the ability to impose the priorities of the environmental agenda on policy, at the local and national level. And there have to be Venetian people, with their voices, projects, votes and willingness to raise these issues.

For centuries the Serenissima not only “dominated the seas”, but was able to do so because behind it was an environmental policy that was attentive to the conservation and reproducibility of resources. This started with the preservation of the livability of its habitat, the Lagoon. From this proceeded an attentive policy of management and renewal of the material resources needed to sustain its life and its trade, always enforced politically before militarily.

Today all of this is more difficult. We even struggle to understand that the destiny of the city is inseparably linked to that of its Lagoon, and that the fight against climate change is an absolute priority, as well as an opportunity to re-establish the economy.

But we cannot run away. It is we Venetians who must take the future of the city and the Lagoon in our own hands. I do not know which side would outweigh the other if we took both models and set them on two plates. On the one hand an ever greater development of cruise tourism, accompanied by a use of the city such as we know today. On the other a cultural and environmental development that is planned and sustainable, allowing the city and the Lagoon to live as a unique specimen to be enjoyed and preserved.

It would be interesting to take that measurement. I wonder if it would be useful to hold a well-articulated and well prepared consultative referendum, organized by the city administration, on one or more of the issues shared by the movements. I think it would carry some weight, and allow the economic powers, the associations and the citizens to have a genuine discussion about the future of the city, the role we want to play in it and about the powers that should govern it. And politicians would have the public’s position to guide them in their actions on this issue.

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