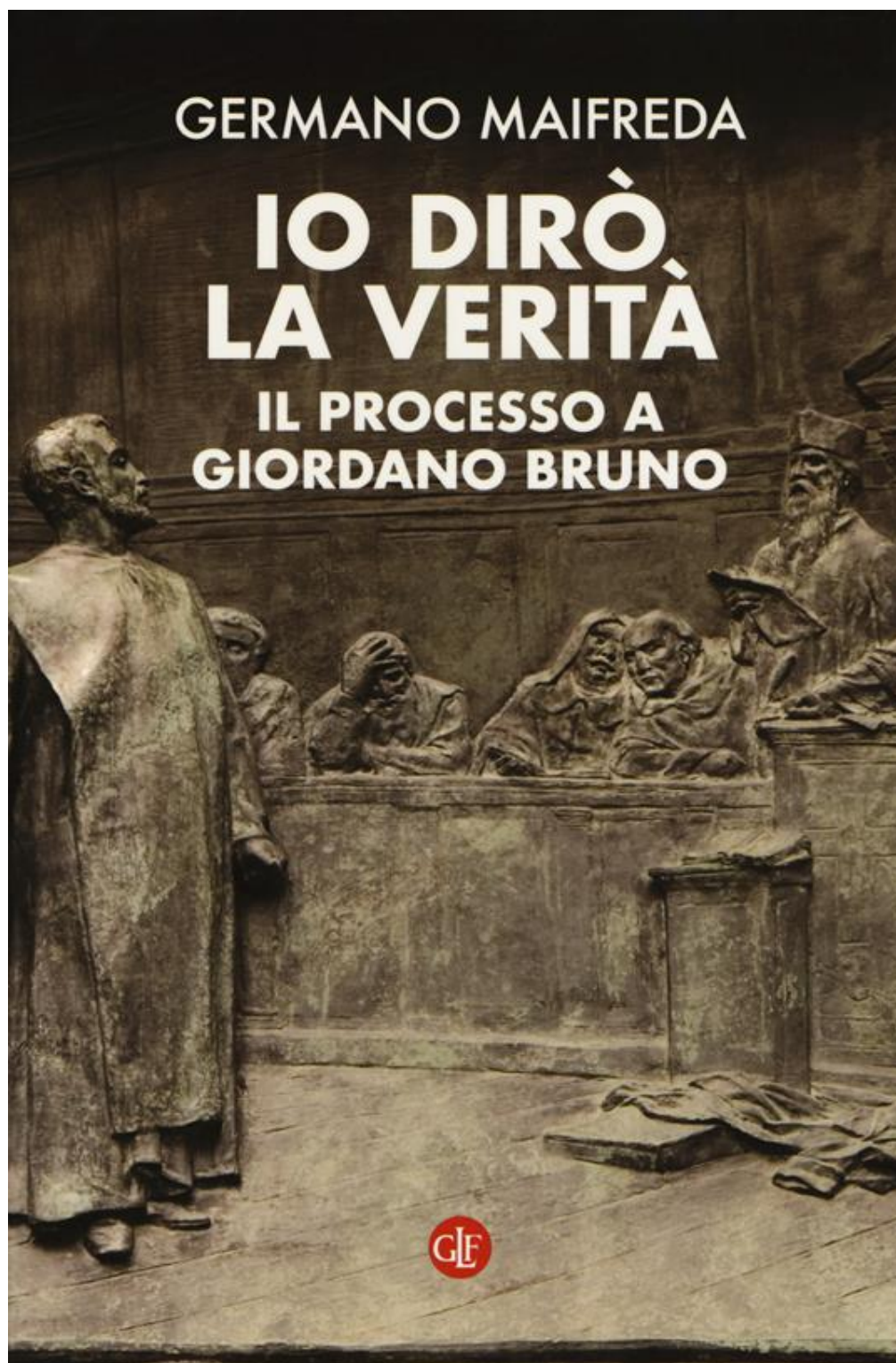


versione italiana

In his book about the trial of Italian Renaissance-era philosopher Giordano Bruno, entitled *I Will Tell the Truth*, historian Germano Maifreda tells the story of how Bruno, after 8 years of imprisonment, tried to engage the tribunal of the Roman Inquisition in an intellectual dispute over his trial, repeatedly presenting carefully argued written briefs in his own defense. One of these was even addressed to the pope. Maifreda suggests that Giordano Bruno's decision to allow himself to be burned alive at the stake came only once he finally understood that the powers he had tried to challenge, and had once hoped to change - the Roman Inquisition and the Holy See - were following a playbook that nothing to do with the truth, but rather a hidden agenda that had been decisively set up against him from the start, pursued by the Inquisition in its characteristic shroud of total secrecy and absolute power.

As it happens, Bruno was first arrested in Venice, where his long imprisonment and trial by the Inquisition began before he was extradited to Rome. Perhaps it is this connection with Bruno that first reminded me of stories I've been reading recently about the much abused minority councilors in the Venice City Council. In fact, the comparison runs deeper, in the sense of going up against an abusive power with its own ruthlessly pursued agenda. From what several councilors have been reporting, it appears that the minority can produce as many proposals, facts and arguments as it wants - but rejection by the majority is virtually guaranteed. The outcome has already been decided against them and in favor of the Mayor's party and proposals, and is imposed in an abusive and derisive manner. The majority doesn't just reject the minority's ideas out of hand; they rub their noses in it too.



While this is hardly tantamount to being sent to the stake, the testimony is nonetheless chilling for today's age, and utterly contrary to what we would expect from a government that promised "open, participatory democracy". For example, Giovanni Andrea Martini informs us that the Council is still meeting on Zoom, and that minority councilors' microphones are silenced by the

majority when they speak, and then their statements are followed by verbal abuse:

This is not the first time I have reported this, but I must do so again: yet again, in City Council any discussion was prevented, thanks to the fact that the President is able to remotely silence undesirable speeches, and then they proceed to personally attack and insult the opposition councilors. These are the weapons used by the majority any time they are faced with criticism.

Then, to emphasize their power, they demonize anyone who expresses different ideas and proposals, and move on to a united vote, following the playbook prepared by leadership. -

Giovanni Andrea Martini, Tutta la Città Insieme! Press Release 12-2-2021

Other recent statements from minority councilors tell much the same story:

There is no possibility of debate about proposals offered by the opposition. I hope that the dialogue between the majority and the opposition in the future can be much more civil. - Cecilia Tonon (Venezia è Tua), La Nuova di Venezia e Mestre 12-26-2021

...Brugnaro only knows how to complain, attacking anyone who thinks differently than him... - Monica Sambo 12-30-2021

I am fully and unconditionally available for a "face to face" debate with this Mayor, in which both of us are given the same amount of time to speak, and without one of the two contenders having his microphone shut off. - Marco Gasparinetti, Terra e Acqua, 12-22-2022

Usually it is the Fuscina group leader who dishes out the insults, but in the most important City Council meetings, such as the last one on the provisional budget, that role passes directly to the Mayor. The key message is that he/they are right, while the opposition is either wrong or understands nothing, regardless. Even when data or well-founded theses are presented, the accusation is that of being incapable of understanding the former and spreading crazy ideas with the latter. - Giovanni Andrea Martini, Tutta la Città Insieme!, from FB, 12-26-2021

IL CONSUNTIVO DI PREVISIONE 2022/2024

## Approvato il bilancio fra insulti e polemiche Insorge l'opposizione, Brugnaro tira dritto

Il sindaco: «La città vuole vincere, troppo facile criticare e basta». Il Pd: «I consiglieri sono bullizzati dal primo cittadino»

VENEZIA

Il consiglio comunale, ad altissimo tasso polemico, approva il bilancio di previsione 2022/2024. Il sindaco Brugnaro, dopo le parole durissime del giorno prima contro i consiglieri Martini e Gasparinetti, e accuse anche personali, ha iniziato tranquillo ma poi ha messo nel mirino Alberto Fantuzo, che il giorno prima si era collegato dalla Palanca, criticato per aver detto che «anche i ciechi restano strabiliati da Ve-

book, il senatore Pd Ferrazzi aveva evidenziato il ruolo del Pd: «Noi non guardiamo al colore politico di chi amministra, ma al bene dei cittadini. Vorremmo fosse così anche a parti alterne», ha scritto il senatore.

Le bordate polemiche lasciano il segno. I consiglieri di opposizione si sono sentiti "bullizzati" dal primo cittadino. Lo dice Marco Gasparinetti, accusato di «essere stato mandato via dall'Europa». Lui ribatte:

ciate tutte le richieste dell'opposizione (residenza, centro maree, verde e della mappatura degli alberi, eliminazione dei tornelli e gestione del turismo). «Chiedono proposte concrete ma è una finta. Noi riceviamo sempre dei no a proposte come quelle sulla residenza che sono applicate altrove, da Milano a Padova», evidenzia la capogruppo Pd Monica Sambo. «Se le proposte sono nostre non le approva. È un atteggiamento distruttivo».

And the concrete results of this virtual policy lockout? The effects for residents go far beyond the higher profile issues like cruise ships or MoSE and climate change. These struggles are about life for people who live and work in the city: it's about jobs, housing, the health of the city and a future for anything other than tourism and construction, on both sides of the bridge. Again, the words of the councilors themselves best describe the outcomes of this one-way style of governing:

The result is a heterogeneous and disjointed city, with the islands where people no longer invest in revitalization, housing and jobs, and the mainland which is almost exclusively based on large commerce and construction, to the extent that the quality of life has lowered while crime has increased. Residents are leaving both. – Giovanni Andrea Martini, FB, 12-26-2021

A few days ago in City Council we were told NO to greater resources for currently empty public housing, NO to a less hateful IRPEF (Personal Income Tax) Municipal surcharge (the current one is at the legal maximum and even applies to the lowest rents), and NO again to a proposal to redevelop the loggia at the Rialto Pescheria... now we learn where the budget resources are going: 'the Sports Complex at Tessera, in part with EU Recovery funds, and the rest (200 million Euro?) with resources saved by the Municipality'. Savings made on the backs of the weakest to indulge the delusions of grandeur of someone who is already wealthy, not to mention owner of a basketball team that wants a new space. – Marco Gasparinetti, Terra e Acqua, from FB 12-29-2021

The only plans mentioned were related to the new sports complex. There was no reference to the many other big investments that are needed for the city, especially from the point of view of the environment and urban regeneration, not to mention housing. When it comes to kindergartens, the Councilor for Education Policy declared that the year's great achievement was the outsourcing of the Mille Colori kindergarten.

Culture has no centrality. The Mayor did not even mention it, and as the Councilor of Culture [Brugnaro has claimed this role for himself] he has not planned or designed anything in recent years. The management of the city is confirmed as totally centered around business and dependent on tourism.

As always there is nothing new on the jobs front. There is no planned project for the revitalization of Porto Marghera, no positive policy to create stable and quality jobs in the tourism sector, and it appears that the famous development agency created by the City has definitively dropped off the radar. - Monica Sambo, PD, from FB 12-30-2021



The top-down, one-way approach is by no means limited to the City Council. Instead the entire system of the Municipality's government has been drastically altered and centralized during Brugnaro's terms as Mayor. Local Municipal governments have been stripped of powers, their offices reduced to skeleton staff. A vast array of public services has been reduced, cut or privatized. Political power has been centralized at Ca' Farsetti, in the hands of the Brugnaro Administration, which under the cover of restoring the budget has dramatically changed the system of city government into the kind of autocracy posing as a democracy that has just been described - something approaching a dictatorship. The courageous leader/figurehead, in the person of Mayor Luigi Brugnaro, lies to the public about sustainability and ecology, managing tourism, security, etc., but has in fact hijacked the political process, and is now using that power to take the money from the city to build his big sports stadium - for the basketball team he owns - while the majority in the City Council passes his agenda unchallenged and abuses the opposition.

At least, I should say, that is how things look to me from where I sit.

In a very real sense this seems (again, to me) like the biggest problem Venice faces, the one that stands in the way of all the rest – if the decision-making apparatus and system of government is so systemically rigged against even suggestions of change from the minority councilors, then what chance is there of addressing any of the major issues in the city? Can Brugnaro and his majority get away with pretending to be a democracy but behaving like a dictatorship, running the city to his personal benefit and the ruin of the area?

Then there is the question of what happens after Brugnaro, and the system he will leave behind. Will a future administration reverse course, decentralize political power to something like its former configuration, allow democratic debate and restore services? Or will the new autocratic system remain, with only new caretakers at the helm? These questions have me even more deeply concerned about the future of Venice, the city so many of us love – enough for some very determined individuals to keep going up against a system that appears to be completely set up against them.

This brings me back to Bruno. Like Bruno, the minority city councilors in Venice face a hostile and biased tribunal that holds absolute power, and respects few rules in exercising it – and has already made up its mind about their ideas. But I don't mean to point this out to be discouraging, but rather to encourage, and to recognize their courage. The City Council is not the Inquisition, and Brugnaro is no pope. Yet the conviction and integrity with which these councilors keep going back to fight them – on the ground of truth, fact, and democratic debate – despite being trapped in a rigged and abusive system, reminds me a great deal of Giordano Bruno arguing his case before the inquisitors. Fortunately, today's city councilors are nowhere near as alone or at risk as Bruno was, but they still deserve much better: they deserve to be heard, and they deserve our support – and the city deserves the participatory democracy the Mayor promised when he was first elected, along with the 30,000 new residents he claimed he would bring back to Venice. These two things, it seems to me, go hand in hand, and I would argue that the reason Venice lacks the latter is due in large part to the violent removal of the former.