

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VENICE¹

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FOR the historian the study of crisis, revolution, riot and disturbance has always had tremendous attractions, appealing to his sense of drama and fulfilling his concern with the mechanics of social and political change. The seventeenth century has become, *par excellence*, the century of revolution; the general crisis of the 1640s has for years been a theatre of debate in the pages of *Past and Present* and other journals where historians have fervently sought to erect or demolish far-reaching explanations for widespread outbreaks of revolution.² Focus on sudden and violent change may deflect us from the intense and conscious efforts poured into the achievement of political stability and the establishment of civil peace—peace between factions, peace between clans, peace among estates and classes: peace based not on the ruthless suppression of individual liberties by arbitrary authority, but rather on the subject's acquiescence in the regime and even his positive contentment with it. In the context of seventeenth-century Europe the maintenance of stability in certain regions demands at least as much explanation as the outbreak of civil disturbance in others. Why do some parts of Europe have so persistent a tradition of revolt, if not of revolution, and others not? In his recent synoptic survey of European and Russian society in the iron century from 1550 to 1650, Mr. Henry Kamen claimed among much else to have assembled and summarized all the available literature on popular rebellions.³

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² Several of these essays are usefully assembled in T. Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660* (London, 1965); cf. also J. H. Elliott, "Revolution and continuity in early modern Europe", *Past and Present*, no. 42 (February, 1969), and R. Forster and J. P. Greene, eds., *Preconditions of Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore-London, 1970).

³ H. Kamen, *The Iron Century: Social Change in Europe, 1550-1650* (London, 1971), pp. xiii, 331-85.

Whether by the neglect of modern historians or through the quiescence of early modern peoples, at least one region was conspicuously absent. Northern Italy contrasted forcibly if silently with the Habsburg hereditary lands or the peripheral regions of Richelieu's France, where after 1632 widespread but amorphous peasant revolt became almost an annual event. And there are almost too many reasons why revolt should so often have been unleashed, given the uncertainties of the harvest, the persistent and compelling need to levy taxes to maintain troops and to satisfy creditors, and the fact that urban militias sometimes entertained a limited sympathy with popular assaults on tax-collectors.¹ Francis Bacon may have made the definitive statement about seventeenth-century disturbance when he declared categorically that "The Causes and Motives of seditions are, innovation in religion; taxes; alteration of laws and customs; breaking of privileges; general oppression; advancement of unworthy persons; strangers; dearths; disbanded soldiers; factions grown desperate; and whatsoever, in offending people, joineth and knitteth them in a common cause".² One may well feel that the historian of revolution has only to establish what particular permutation of Bacon's "Causes and Motives" sparked off the disturbances that interest him, and to decide what weighting should be given to each one. But what definitive statements are there about the causes and motives of stability in early modern Europe? How did people think that government could stave off civil strife, and what models did the practical theorist hold up for imitation?

I shall be concerned with one particular model of political and social stability which flourished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the Republic of Venice.³ A city state which

¹ See B. Porchnev, *Les soulèvements populaires en France de 1623 à 1648* (Paris, 1963).

² From the Essay "Of Seditions and Troubles", *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis and D. D. Heath, vi (London, 1858), 409.

³ There is now a plentiful literature on the various "myths" of Venice, including the myth of Venetian resistance to change. See the useful references in O. Logan, *Culture and Society in Venice, 1470-1790* (London, 1972), pp. 1-19, and two recent contributions: M. Gilmore, "Myth and Reality in Venetian Political Theory" and W. Bouwsma, "Venice and the Political Education of Europe", both in J. R. Hale, ed., *Renaissance Venice* (London, 1973).

ruled two empires to west and east, one maritime and one territorial, it seemed to have demonstrated an almost incredible capacity for survival: for withstanding the assaults of would-be conquerors, for detecting and preventing domestic conspiracy, for deflecting those spiritual weapons of interdict and excommunication with which its neighbour the Pope might try to excite sedition, and for forestalling domestic protest against the regime without making concessions to the people at large. Not only did Venice survive: it also seemed impervious to peaceful internal change, especially in the composition of its ruling elite. This was a legally defined patriciate which excluded many rich men and comprised as many poor ones, was based upon hereditary right, and came as near as any group of rulers in Europe to forming a closed caste. For centuries Venice was governed by a sharply defined knot of families whose authority was not seriously challenged until Napoleon came upon the scene. Full citizenship in Venice coincided with the status of noble or gentleman, and conferred the right to a formal part in making or acclaiming decisions with implications for the subject peoples of the two empires. It belonged to those with the hereditary right to enter the Great Council on reaching the age of twenty-five. For as much as two hundred and sixty-five years, from the war upon Genoa in 1381 to the war in defence of Crete in 1646, no new recruits were to be admitted to its doors, though honorary noble rank might be conceded to mercenary captains, papal nephews, exiled Balkan royalty, and other such personages not seriously expected to take any part in government. True, this policy was substantially modified in and after the mid-seventeenth century, when in a somewhat grudging fashion as many as eighty new families were recruited to the aristocracy between 1646 and 1669 on payment of fat fees of 100,000 ducats per family to finance the war effort against the Turk.¹ But there was still very little to compare with the spectacular inflations of honours in England, Castile and the Viceroyalty of Naples in the first half of the seventeenth century, or even with the steady ascent of moneyed Frenchmen into the ranks of the robe nobility.

¹ See J. C. Davis, *The Decline of the Venetian Nobility as a Ruling Class* (Baltimore, 1962), pp. 76, 106-10.

It was in that spell of tightest closure that the myth or legend of Venetian immunity to change had first been formulated ; and in the seventeenth century that Venice's rigid social and political system remained conspicuously unshaken even when far more flexible societies were tossing in the throes of the revolutionary convulsion. Nor had Venice undergone any prominent or drastic constitutional changes. There might be jurisdictional disputes between magistrates or councillors, conflicts between the Senate and the Council of Ten over their relative competences, adjustments of the balance of authority between them, measures to prevent the engrossment of office by narrow oligarchies. But there was very little attempt to rock the foundations of authority or challenge the axioms on which it rested. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries chroniclers recorded few popular disturbances of any moment whatsoever—the odd demand by Arsenal workers for better or prompter pay, occasional food riots when inedible millet loaves were dispensed from the public granaries, upheavals caused by the refusal of bakers to accept debased coins in which they had lost all confidence.¹ Starving peasants flocked into Venice in famine years. They came, however, not to riot but to enjoy the benefits of cheap breadstuffs and beans imported from Turkey or Alexandria, and their migrations were controlled with some success by Venice's poor-law authorities, the *Provveditori alla Sanità*.² English visitors might be alarmed by the intimidating presence of Lombard toughs or *bravi* disfiguring the streets in the small hours, or shocked by the Italian practice of allowing men to fight “at sharpe” in the presence of excited spectators.³ Venetians abroad might be more impressed by London's law and order than Englishmen by Venice's, but Venice knew no equivalent to the ritualized and licensed violence of the apprentices and shopboys who roamed the London streets on Shrove-Tuesday and May-day, and so

¹ R. Romano, “Economic Aspects of the Construction of Warships in Venice in the Sixteenth Century”, in B. Pullan, ed., *Crisis and Change in the Venetian Economy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1968), pp. 62–3 ; B. Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: the Social Institutions of a Catholic State, to 1620* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 9–10.

² Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, pp. 243 f., 287–9, 358 f.

³ T. Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities* (2 vols., Glasgow, 1905), i. 413.

scandalized the Venetian embassy-chaplain, Busino, in the summer of 1618.¹

There was little sign of any dangerous correspondence between noble discontent and popular unrest. The poorer nobility were stirred by demagogic leaders, by Alvise da Riva in 1617 and by Renier Zeno ten years later ; but somehow this failed to infect the people at large. Da Riva and Zeno had no visions of a new order ; they were critics of the current establishment, but not of the system. Zeno's radicalism seems to have advanced no further than complaints against the Doge's family, aspersions on the justice meted out by the Council of Ten, and a suggestion that the revenues of lucrative vacant bishoprics be made over to the noble poor.² Hence the people remained, as Sir Henry Wotton had once called them, " the plebeity, whose supreme object is bread ".³ And the corporate rule of the aristocracy was never thrown off balance by the advent of any outstanding families aspiring to be seigneurs, princes, managers or even first citizens, for Venice knew no parallel to the Medici, the Bentivoglio or the Doria, let alone the great lords and Dukes of Milan. Even the appointment of a Doge of strong personality and " great understandings ", like Leonardo Donà in January 1606, was a departure from normal practice, for " great understandings are rather to be wished in Princes that are absolute ".⁴ Venetians' deep respect for age would normally ensure that this need not happen ; and to judge by Wotton's malicious but lively account of the elections of 1618, candidates for the horned bonnet were well advised to improve their chances by exaggerating their decrepitude.⁵

Venice, too, achieved distinction by retaining her independence

¹ For Busino's remarks on the apprentices of London, see *Calendar of State Papers Venetian*, xv, ed. A. B. Hinds (London, 1909), doc. 424, pp. 246-7, 29 June 1618 ; for his view of law and order in London, *ibid.* doc. 218, pp. 135-6, 7 February 1618.

² On Da Riva see the chronicle of Gian Carlo Sivos, *Libro Quarto delli Dosi di Venetia*, Biblioteca Marciana, Venice, Italian MSS., Class VII, no. 122 (8863), ff. 71^v-72. On Renier Zeno see G. Cozzi, *Il Doge Nicolò Contarini: ricerche sul patriziato veneziano agli inizi del Seicento* (Venice-Rome, 1958), pp. 229-83, 294.

³ Wotton to the Marquis of Buckingham, 25 May 1618, in Logan Pearsall Smith, *The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton* (2 vols., Oxford, 1907), ii. 139.

⁴ Wotton to the Earl of Salisbury, 18 February 1606 (*ibid.* i, p. 344).

⁵ Wotton to the Marquis of Buckingham, 25 May 1618 (*ibid.* ii. 136).

(or, as the English would have it, her virginity) against alarmingly heavy odds. Fifteen years after the invasions of Italy began in 1494, the great powers of Europe, combining in the famous League of Cambrai, had hatched their plot to wipe Venice's mainland empire from the map. Despite widespread revolt on the part of certain families in some mainland cities, the Republic had survived and recovered most of its territories. By the early seventeenth century it was very much (to all enemies of Spain) an oasis in the desert peninsula blighted north and south by Habsburg rule. Venice was now the only Italian power apart from the Papacy to retain unimpaired both its independence and its ancient character, without becoming a satellite of either Spain or France. She seemed like a massive obstacle thrown in the path of three great powers, the Habsburgs, the Papacy and the Ottoman Empire, whose claims to authority had once been infinite and could be so again. Potentially she was the bottleneck in the elaborate system of communications linking the dominions of the Habsburg. Perceptive travellers saw that her strength was passive and defensive, resting as it did on the great fortresses of Palma in Friuli and of the Canea in Crete, on the deployment of her legendary wealth in bribes to enemies and subsidies to allies.¹ Even her great ships, "Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood", were useless save in defensive actions at harbours and river-mouths.² But she could not live by fortresses alone. Only great inner stability and the loyalty of patricians and subjects could stave off the threat of conspiracy and save the regime from being undermined by intelligent enemies.

Small wonder, then, that contemporaries should ask how the Venetians did it, and should find themselves strongly attracted, in times of uncertainty and enforced political experiment, by the legend of Venice. Perhaps the Florentines in the days of

¹ W. Lithgow, *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures and Painefull Peregrinations of long Nineteen Yeares Travayles from Scotland to the most famous Kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Affrica* (Glasgow, 1906), pp. 35, 36, 52-53, 73-74; James Howell, *S.P.Q.V. A Survey of the Signorie of Venice, of her admired policy, and method of Government, etc., with a Cohortation to all Christian Princes to resent her dangerous Condition at present* (London, 1651), p. 181.

² C. Hughes, ed., *Shakespeare's Europe: unpublished chapters of Fynes Moryson's Itinerary* (London, 1903), pp. 136-7.

Savonarola were the only European society actually to transplant on to their own soil a version of Venetian institutions. For the moral renewal of the citizens and the godly regime of Savonarola must be accompanied by a transformation of the outward form of the state, to make it a spiritual Ark that could outlast the Flood of the French King's invasion. More earthily, it could be said that, having expelled the Medici who had so long given direction to their state, they were seeking some means of achieving stable corporate rule, without over-generous concessions either to the people or to the influence of individual families. "I believe", said Savonarola, "that there is no better [form] than that of the Venetians, and that you should follow their example, leaving out some things which are not suited for your needs, such as the Doge. Thus I also believe it would be well, in order to inspire everyone to behave virtuously, that the artisans in some way be made eligible for office and, being honoured, become accustomed to behave well. And therefore it would not be misguided to have the major offices chosen by election and the minor ones by lot".¹ A Venetian might have been puzzled by the suggestion of a Venetian constitution without a Doge, and might never have recognized the Venetian in the Florentine Great Council. But he would surely have accepted the principle of granting artisans a nicely calculated portion of honour in order to fasten them to the established order; and the Doge, or a version of him, was not long in coming in the shape of the Gonfalonier Soderini. And the Great Council was to rise and fall again with the last Florentine Republic in the years which followed the Sack of Rome in 1527.²

The English became powerfully attracted to Venice in the early seventeenth century. Sir Lewes Lewkenor, the English

¹ See especially D. Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 138–58; N. Rubinstein, "I primi anni del Consiglio Maggiore di Firenze", *Archivio Storico Italiano*, anno 112 (1954); N. Rubinstein, "Politics and Constitution in Florence at the end of the Fifteenth Century", *Italian Renaissance Studies: a Tribute to the late Cecilia M. Ady*, ed. E. F. Jacob (London, 1960); R. Pecchioli, "Il 'mito' di Venezia e la crisi fiorentina intorno al 1500", *Studi Storici*, iii (1962); F. Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution in Florentine Political Thought", *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. N. Rubinstein (London, 1968), pp. 477 f.

² See Cecil Roth, *The Last Florentine Republic* (London, 1925), pp. 49 f.

courtier and soldier, translated and published in 1599 Cardinal Gasparo Contarini's standard eulogy of *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*. Perhaps he could count on a market, and perhaps he helped to enlarge one already coming into being, for English interest in Venice was also freely expressed on the London stage by the performances (between 1596 and 1606) of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello* and *Volpone*. The renewal of diplomatic relations in 1603, the growth of a genteel tourist traffic to a Catholic state where the Protestant could share the security of the Greek and the Jew from persecution,¹ the unfailing hospitality of the University of Padua: all these things helped to quicken English enthusiasm for the Republic and its State. Given the inscrutable, dignified reserve of Venetian noblemen, and the absence from among them (at least in Venice) of personal ostentation, lavish hospitality, great retinues of servants or bids for personal popularity,² admirers concentrated on the Venetian state and on the great patrician corporation, for there were no great clans or dynasties to deflect their gaze. To judge by Sir Politic Would-Be,³ Contarini's book became an essential item in the earnest traveller's baggage: without it, indeed, he could have known little of the complex procedures of Venetian government, and the necessary reliance on Contarini may have made the observer more prone to accept the Venetians' image of themselves. Even for an ambassador there was nothing of the neurotic,

¹ On this see especially the speech of the Ambassador Sir Dudley Carleton in the Collegio, 12 July 1612, in *Calendar of State Papers Venetian*, xii, ed. H. F. Brown (London, 1905), doc. 577, pp. 390-1.

² Cf. Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities*, i, 318, 396-8, 415; Fynes Moryson, *Itinerary* (4 vols., Glasgow, 1907), iv. 94. For their rather less restrained behaviour outside the capital, see the remarks of Carleton quoted in Cozzi, *Il Doge Nicolò Contarini*, p. 15 n. 2: "they looke to landward buieng house and lands, furnishing themselves with coch and horses, and giving themselves the goode time with more shew and gallantrie than was wont . . .".

³ "Sir Politic. I now have lived here 'tis some fourteen months

Within the first week of my landing here

All took me for a citizen of Venice,

I knew the forms so well.

Peregrine. (*aside*) And nothing else.

Sir Politic. I had read Contarene, took me a house,

Dealt with my Jews to furnish it with movables . . .".

Volpone. Act IV, scene iii, lines 36-41.

extravagant, gossip-charged intimacy of the court of King James : no hunting trips in the prince's company, no confidential interviews with great ministers, only the frigid formalities of the Collegio. And Contarini's classic statement of the myth of Venetian stability received dramatic confirmation in 1606-7, when the famous episode of the Interdict followed closely upon the Gunpowder Plot and roughly coincided with James I's collision with the Pope over his attempts to impose on Catholic subjects an oath of allegiance denying the right of the Pope to depose sovereigns.¹ An officially Protestant state with a large Catholic minority supposedly on the point of rebellion, fearful to the point of paranoia of Jesuit conspiracy,² England could feel a strong bond of sympathy with the aristocratic republic which so stoutly defended its sovereign power over the property and persons of the clergy. And a small group of Englishmen around the embassy in Venice even became convinced of the possibility of causing Venice to turn Protestant and to become the fulcrum in Italy of a grand anti-Catholic alliance.³ By defying papal censures and arriving at a settlement which entitled her to exclude indefinitely from her territory the priests of the Society of Jesus, Venice had once more demonstrated her stability in the face of danger. Hence the well-worn allusions to the "liberty of Venice" took on a new meaning, for they now tended to convey the Republic's determination to uphold the sovereignty of princes against ecclesiastical encroachment. And in the era of civil war and regicide, when "these days are days of shaking . . . and this

¹ Cf. especially the despatch of Zorzi Giustinian, Venetian Ambassador in England, 21st June 1606: "I enclose a copy of the oath, which Parliament has just ordered all subjects to take under heavy penalties for refusal. The object is to counteract the consequences of a possible excommunication, and the cause of the step was the quarrel between the Republic and the Pope, who is considered to be very fiery and hot-headed" (*Calendar of State Papers Venetian*, x, ed. H. F. Brown (London, 1900), doc. 534, p. 363). On 27 July 1606, Wotton told the Collegio that "The questions now pending between your Serenity and the Pope have given occasion to this resolution . . ." (*ibid.* doc. 555, p. 381).

² For some interesting remarks on this subject see C. Z. Wiener, "The Beleaguered Isle. A Study of Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Anti-Catholicism", *Past and Present*, no. 51 (May 1971).

³ See Smith, *Life and Letters of Wotton*, i, 87 f.; Letters V-VI of William Bedell in E. S. Shuckburgh, ed., *Two Biographies of William Bedell, Bishop of Kilmore* (Cambridge, 1902), pp. 226-51.

shaking is universal",¹ theorists would return again to Venice in the hope of divining a recipe for the "immortal common-wealth forever incapable of corruption".² Admiration for Venice politically was coupled, however, with a certain contempt for her lack of economic enterprise and boldness. In James's day her ships were noted for their clumsy, ponderous design and lack of fight³; she would never recover her ancient position as an entrepôt, but still refused to adapt to altered circumstance. Extreme caution, reckoned for a vice in the economic sphere, was counted for a virtue in the political. The ossified (not to say fossilized) constitution, the gerontocracy where "*gray heads sway, and green heads obey*",⁴ commanded great formal respect abroad.

Where, then, did Venice's secret lie? I could not, of course, claim to penetrate it within the space of one short paper and in the absence of a great deal of comparative material which could be used to establish the uniqueness or otherwise of Venice's social and political institutions. There is the further difficulty that the causes of stability can only be matters for speculation in a way in which the causes of revolution are not—for rebels, even if they do not always formulate sophisticated programmes or elaborate revolutionary philosophies, do at least draw up lists of grievances and demand their remedy. The student of stability is writing about the dog which does not bark; the motives of the silent are sometimes harder to discern than those of the vociferous are to disentangle. Fortunately, contemporary theorists speculated a good deal about Venice; a native Venetian, Gasparo Contarini, analysed society and the state in terms which sometimes seem frankly Machiavellian; and there is something to be said for an

¹ Jeremiah Whittaker, preaching before the House of Commons in 1643, quoted in H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century", in Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe*, p. 59.

² See Z. S. Fink, "Venice and English Political Thought in the Seventeenth Century", *Modern Philology*, xxxviii (1940-1), and his *The Classical Republicans* (Evanston, Illinois, 1945).

³ See the despatches of Giovanni Carlo Scaramelli, 11 September 1603 (*Calendar of State Papers Venetian*, x, doc. 128, pp. 91-92), and of Antonio Foscarini, 14 July and 2 December 1611 (*ibid.* xii, doc. 276, pp. 179-80; doc. 383, pp. 249-50).

⁴ The phrase is Howell's (see *S.P.Q.V.*, pp. 3-4).

attempt to examine the principal points in these tracts and to test them very approximately against what is known of the historical reality.

There was a fairly well defined body of published literature about the Republic which from the early sixteenth century underwent steady accretions but few substantial modifications, its authors consciously addressing themselves to the problem, not merely of describing and classifying government institutions and magistracies, but also of conveying the spirit which gave them life and of probing the secret of Venetian resistance to change and corruption. Let us examine some of the myth-making which extended chronologically from the first publication in the 1540s of Contarini's famous treatise to the *Survey of the Signorie of Venice* put forth in 1651 by the Welsh litterateur James Howell and introduced by that fulsome verse :

Upon the Citty and Signorie of Venice.

Could any State on Earth Immortall be,
 Venice by Her rare Government is She ;
 Venice Great Neptunes Minion, still a Mayd,
 Though by the warrlikst Potentats assayd ;
 Yet She retaines Her Virgin-waters pure,
 Nor any Forren mixtures can endure ;
 Though, Syren-like on Shore and Sea, Her Face
 Enchants all those whom once She doth embrace ;
 Nor is ther any can Her beauty prize
 But he who hath beheld Her with his Eyes :

These following Leaves display, if well observed,
 How she so long Her Maydenhead preservd,
 How for sound prudence She still bore the Bell ;
 Whence may be drawn this high-fetchd parallel,

Venus and Venice are Great Queens in their degree,
 Venus is Queen of Love, Venice of Policie.

From this literature came forth four or five standard explanations of Venetian stability, repetitious and derivative variations on a limited number of themes ; and it is these that we ought now to dissect.

As might be expected the arguments of contemporary observers did not derive solely from empirical observation, but

relied partly on hallowed maxims lifted from classical and neo-classical theory. Venice's constitution lent itself easily enough to the famous proposition that the degeneration and corruption liable to overtake the pure governmental forms of monarchy and aristocracy could only be averted by creating a mixed constitution combining elements of both and adding an ingredient of democracy. In this it was hardly unique, and may not have fitted the recipe much better than, say, Strasbourg (another tranquil city),¹ or indeed than many other German or Swiss towns which had large and small councils, elders, mayors and burgomasters to govern them. But Venice was thrown into special prominence by its standing as a sovereign state which ruled two empires. The Doge of Venice provided the element of the One, the Senate, Collegio and Council of Ten the element of the Few, and the enormous Great Council the element of the Many.² The presence of the Doge, the only patrician magistrate elected to serve for life, could counter the confusions and uncertainties which might otherwise have arisen from the swift circulation of office. The Senate, a body of mature patricians who made decisions on matters concerning finance, peace and war, and the Council of Ten (a permanent committee of public safety) were believed to offer that degree of secrecy and decisiveness which was vital to the successful conduct of government business. At the same time the oligarchic tendencies which might have been created by an over-concentration of authority in these legislative bodies were supposedly checked by the presence of the Great Council, that vast and heterogeneous club for patricians and politicians. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the function of the Great Council (then at least two

¹ Cf. M. U. Chrisman, *Strasbourg and the Reform: a Study in the Process of Change* (New Haven-London, 1967), pp. 21-27; and B. Hall, "The Reformation City", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, liv (1971-2), pp. 135-6, quoting Erasmus's comment: "I saw a monarchy without tyranny, an aristocracy without factions, a democracy without disorder . . .".

² On Venice's "mixed constitution" see G. Contarini, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, trans. Lewes Lewkenor (London, 1599), pp. 15, 16, 19, 40; D. Giannotti, *Libro de la Republica de Vinitiani*, especially ff. 22^v.-23. As Howell tersely puts it, "This government may be sayed to have a *grain* of Monarchy, a *dose* of Democracy, and a *dramm* if not an ounce of Optimacy" (*S.P.Q.V.*, p. 10).

thousand strong)¹ was clearly not to conduct debate so much as to elect to all substantive magisterial offices and to acclaim a number of domestic laws to which no secrecy attached. At intervals, when roused from its prevailing apathy to a state of real indignation, it could make its views felt by refusing to elect to the chief councils and magistracies, or at least by declining to elect the usual people to them. For the most part, however, the silence of the Great Council was supposedly broken only by the tramp of voters to the urns which they filled with padded ballot-balls—and it was unchivalrous of a character in Harrington's *Oceana* to hint that these quasi-military manoeuvres were in fact a ritual specially devised by the Venetians for the benefit of foreigners,² like native dances for visiting royalty.

The "mixed constitution" theory sounds reasonably plausible, though it does of course rest on the dubious assumption—or pious fiction—that there was a genuinely democratic or popular element in the constitution of the Republic of Venice. If Venice was in any sense a democracy it was, like the Kingdom of Poland, a democracy only for noblemen. And even in the sixteenth century such an acute critic as Jean Bodin could challenge the theory of the "mixed constitution" on the grounds that the Venetian state was nothing but a pure aristocracy and that sovereignty within it was located in a single place, the Great Council: it was not diffused among the several principal organs of state.³ But the theory of the "mixed constitution" was not quite as paradoxical as it sounds, for the Great Council embraced persons of all degrees of prosperity from the immensely rich to the abjectly poor. Descent from patrician ancestors, not wealth earned or inherited, was the criterion for admission to the Great Council, and Gasparo Contarini expounded with eloquence the

¹ Davis, *Decline of the Venetian Nobility*, p. 137.

² Lord Epimonus de Garrula: "For a Council, and not a word spoken in it, is a contradiction. But there is such a pudder with their marching and counter-marching, as, tho' never a one of them draw a Sword, you would think they were training; which till I found that they did it only to entertain strangers, I came from among them as wise as I went thither . . ." (J. Harrington, *Works*, ed. J. Toland, Dublin, 1737, p. 118).

³ Cf. E. Gianturco, "Bodin's Conception of the Venetian Constitution and his Critical Rift with Fabio Albergati", *Revue de littérature comparée*, xviii (1938).

theory that disinterested service to the state could only be expected from those not engaged in the sordid struggle for private wealth.¹ There was no real drop-hatch for the poor nobility, and poverty in itself made no barrier to the privileges of patrician rank—though a noble in debt to the fisc might see them suspended.² Granted the premise that the political nation could properly be equated with a small hereditary caste of full citizens, who were the Venetian state in microcosm, the theory of the “mixed constitution” stands.

Likewise borrowed from classical theory was the argument that Venetian stability was to be explained by the existence of a substantial middle class: not in the sense of an estate of persons floating mid-way up the social hierarchy, but rather in that of a large group of full citizens or noblemen who were not as rich as some and not as poor as others. It could be argued that one of the most fundamental causes of revolution was the development of extremes of rich and poor within a society, with the attendant risk that ambitious men of wealth might break away from their fellows and try to build on the discontent of the poor. At least one observer of Venice believed that quite an even distribution of wealth among Venetian patricians had been achieved by their provisions for the circulation and distribution of office.³ In theory at least there were costly, prestigious offices to satisfy the rich, in the shape of embassies to crowned heads or governorships in the big provincial cities such as Padua, Brescia or Verona. And there was a reasonable supply of offices of profit, conferring small salaries, to support the poor and to give them a stake in the established regime. Certainly it seems to have been true that official salaries of ambassadors failed to keep pace with the massive demands for official display which were made of them during the inflationary years of the later sixteenth century. The Habsburg and later the Stuart embassies became ruinously expensive, and voting a personal enemy into a post he could not refuse became a

¹ Contarini, *Commonwealth*, pp. 16–18.

² For examples, see B. Pullan, “The Occupations and Investments of the Venetian Nobility in the middle and late sixteenth century”, in Hale, ed., *Renaissance Venice*, at p. 395.

³ G. Botero, *Relatione della Repubblica Venetiana* (Venice, 1605), f. 88.

recognized tactic of the malevolent.¹ It may be hard to believe that the rocketing cost of office really became a form of surtax which pared down the fortunes of the rich and brought about a genuine levelling of wealth. At least this meant, however, that the cost of public splendour did not have to be borne by the taxpayers at large, but rather by a small rich elite specially charged with it: the courtiers themselves paid for the court. And if one attaches any credit to Trevor-Roper's thesis that the intensity of seventeenth-century revolt varied directly with the burden of the court,² this explanation for the stability of Venice can hardly be dismissed. There were undoubtedly categories of office reserved by custom to the poor, in the shape of minor provincial governorships and particularly of legal offices in the so-called Quarantie in Venice itself: the elected Heads of the Quarantie were the natural tribunes of the people in almost any disturbance affecting the interests of the poorer nobility. Certainly the pastures were too scanty, and there is plenty of documentary evidence of poor nobles having to wait years before obtaining an office. Given that the sum total of offices—both paid and unpaid—was not much more than six or seven hundred, and that the number of eligible noblemen was usually in excess of two thousand, this situation was almost bound to arise. But the poor nobility did not abandon their hopes of gain from a regime which, for all its failure to relieve their poverty, still accorded them higher standing than their plebeian counterparts. The rigidity of the Venetian social system did at least mean that the Republic—unlike the Stuarts and their advisers, unlike the government of Louis XIII with its massive creations and sales of office—had never devalued the rank of nobleman or caused its holders to lose confidence in it.

But, as contemporaries surmised, such rigidity could be tolerable only if compensations were offered to those excluded from the patriciate, and if something were done to offer a measure of economic security to artisans, labourers and their dependents.³ Any analysis of Venetian stability must surely take account of the

¹ Pullan, "Occupations and Investments", pp. 396-7; B. Pullan, "Service to the Venetian State: Aspects of Myth and Reality in the early seventeenth century", *Studi Secenteschi*, v (1964), 117-20.

² Trevor-Roper, "The General Crisis".

³ Contarini, *Commonwealth*, pp. 138 f.; Botero, *Relatione*, ff. 97 f.

almost total absence from Venice of any discernible “ bourgeois mentality ” or “ plebeian class-consciousness ” capable of challenging the authority of the established patriciate. Around the patricians—or immediately below them in the legally defined hierarchy—was an outer circle of so-called *cittadini*.¹ It is best to use the word *cittadini* rather than translate it by its seeming English equivalent of “ citizen ”, because the basic privileges of citizenship were of an economic character. They did not enfranchise their holder, but bestowed the coveted and cherished right to engage from Venice directly in commerce with the Levant: a right generally denied to all foreigners (Sephardic Jews apart) who had not wholly identified themselves with Venice by prolonged residence and regular payment of taxes. From the *cittadini* was recruited a further elite of non-nobles who staffed the chancery and provided the Senate and Council of Ten with their permanent secretariate. It has always been quite impossible to identify the nobility and *cittadinanza* with distinctive social and economic orders, to cast one in the role of a feudal aristocracy and the other in that of a rising bourgeoisie, or even plausibly to represent them as a *noblesse d'épée* and a *noblesse de la robe*. The two legally defined estates performed very similar, or at least analogous, economic functions; and although the *cittadinanza* may have inclined more than the nobles to industrial enterprise the distinction even here was not altogether clearcut. Noble printers, soapmakers and cloth-manufacturers were certainly not unknown. Nor in any simple sense could the *cittadinanza* be called a body of permanent Outs, recruiting material for a standing country party. For their admission to the permanent civil service may even have meant that they were the real powers behind the multiple thrones of their patrician masters, who came and went while they remained, and had to rely on them for instruction in the purpose and scope of their offices. And Venice had, in the famous Scuole Grandi, institutions of very varied functions which, among much else, carried out the dual task both of providing honourable offices for the rich *cittadini* and

¹ On the *cittadini* see Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, pp. 99–108, and U. Tucci, “ The Psychology of the Venetian Merchant in the Sixteenth Century ”, in Hale, *Venetian Studies*, pp. 360 f.

of creating a certain dependence of poor upon rich. These religious brotherhoods were like extended families or artificial kin-groups,¹ formed by common devotion to a particular saint and united in pursuing a common treasury of merit upon which all could draw. Family loyalties can stand opposed to class loyalties, and the creation by these brotherhoods of vertical, paternalistic, emotional bonds analogous to those of the biological family may well have helped to inhibit anything approaching nascent class conflict. From what we know of Venetian poor laws and philanthropy, they seem to have been reasonably efficient, though in the absence of comparable studies of other Italian cities it is hard to assess their role in the preservation of stability. Four things, at least, are clear : that their operation was biased towards the generous reward of state service, and the loyal and dutiful mariner stood the best chance of an almshouse or a dowry for his daughter ; that the administration of charities at the parochial and other levels drew noblemen and citizens together round the table ; that the practice of committing charity to institutions and not to individuals may have helped to prevent the formation of personal clienteles by individuals bidding for subversive popularity ; and that the central aim of Counter Reformation philanthropy, which heavily influenced the policies of the state, can well be defined as an attempt to establish a disciplined and moral society, obedient to social superiors, and hence conducive to the salvation of the maximum number of souls. In most circumstances, Catholicism made for social cohesion ; but there were a few situations in which " Papalists " did not.

By the mid-seventeenth century, observers of Venice in officially Protestant countries, acquainted as some of them were with the writings of Paolo Sarpi and his history of the Interdict, could pass beyond the conventions erected by Gasparo Contarini and seize on a new " cause " for Venice's " continuance " : the firm exclusion of clerics from any position of direct political influence, from sharing in state secrets, and from any chance to disseminate subversion from the pulpit.

¹ For this concept see J. Bossy, " The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe ", *Past and Present*, no. 47 (May 1970), pp. 58-59. On the Scuole Grandi and on Venetian philanthropy in general, see my *Rich and Poor*.

It being too well known [wrote James Howell] that Churchmen are the most perilous and pernicious Instruments in a *State*, if they misapply their talent, and employ it to poyson the hearts of the peeple, to intoxicat their brains, and suscitat them to sedition, and a mislike of the government ; and now Churchmen have more power to do this in regard they have the sway on the noblest part of the rational Creature, over the soul and the intellectualls ; Therefore if any intermeddle with matters of State in the Pulpitt, they are punish'd in an extraordinary severe manner. Yet they bear a very high respect unto the *Church* as long as she keeps within her own sphere, and breaks not out into ceccentricall and irregular motions.¹

No doubt Howell, emerging from eight years' confinement in the Fleet in 1650,² was strongly moved by English experiences of Puritanism, of the excesses of a godly people urged on by their preachers: bridling the pulpit-ranter was one means, perhaps even the surest of all, to maintaining a stable state. Otherwise, he was simply accepting and publicizing Sarpi's version of Venice as the state which had fought courageously to defend the sacred and God-given authority of the prince against the encroaching clergy. Perhaps few English Protestants would have questioned Sarpi's portrayal of her as a state which had encountered and overcome deliberate and cunning attempts at subversion—the designs of the Pope to excite sedition by imposing his interdict in 1606–7, the determination of the Jesuits to obey it, and (with the Capuchins as somewhat embarrassed accomplices) to excite the Venetian people to riot on their departure.³ In the eyes of Sarpi's English translator, writing his foreword to the *History of the Quarrels*, the Jesuits were the Janissaries of the Papacy, the fanatical shock troops of the Holy See, and the Venetian Republic was of course extolled for giving the Jesuits their marching orders and passing an "irrevocable decree" for their expulsion. For were they not the ruthless enemies of any *status quo*?

Without question, when they go to their own place, the Devill is wise enough to pin up these Brouillons in some close dungeon by themselves, for otherwise they

¹ Howell, *S.P.Q.V.*, pp. 7–8.

² J. Jacobs, ed., *Epistolae Ho-Eliaanae, the Familiar Letters of James Howell, Historiographer Royal to Charles II* (2 vols., London, 1892), i. xlii–xliv.

³ P. Sarpi, *Istoria dell' Interdetto (e altri scritti editi e inediti)*, ed. M. D. Busnelli and G. Gambarin (3 vols., Bari, 1940), i. 47–52. A rather different picture of the Jesuits of Venice and their activities emerges from P. Pirri, *L'Interdetto di Venezia del 1606 e i Gesuiti* (Rome, 1959).

would disturbe *Hell* itselſe, and Satan ſhould have no peace in his owne Kingdome, which (as our Saviour tells us), if it be divided cannot ſtand. . . .¹

In her defiance of ecclesiastical authority Venice was not, of course, unique among Catholic states, and collisions between the Republic and its clergy were scarcely more frequent than those between the Viceregal government in Milan and the intransigent Archbishop Carlo Borromeo. Venice's controversy with the Pope, wrote Wotton in the autumn of 1606, "hath a particular conformitie with the liberties and exemptions of the Church of Fraunce".² And if we focus solely on the Venice that expelled the Jesuits in 1606, we may forget the Venice that had admitted them in 1550. But Venice was the Pope's neighbour, and certain unneighbourly disputes were especially liable to explode between the two powers. Frontier quarrels, rows about the Po, Venetian intrusions into Romagna, the Venetian threat to the developing port of Ancona: all these things could provoke controversies in which the Pope was especially prone to resort to spiritual weapons to gain temporal ends. Over the years the Venetians developed very serviceable techniques of resistance to such tactics, and in Sarpi they found a lucid propagandist more than capable of transforming their specific disputes into issues of universal meaning which touched on the sovereignty of all princes. More mundanely, lack of economic dependence on Rome must have made it far easier for Venetians than for Florentines to withstand the blows of interdict and excommunication, which exposed the assets of merchants and bankers to seizure in the Papal States, if in no other place.³

Many observers listed these causes of continuance: none would, perhaps none could, establish a hierarchy among them. For them stability and incorruption were conditions that required careful explanation, above all when they were found in a state that

¹ *The History of the Quarrels of Pope Paul V with the State of Venice* (London, 1626).

² Wotton to James I, 26 September/6 October 1606 (Public Record Office, London, S.P. 99/3, ff. 179^v.-80.)

³ Cf. J. Delumeau, *L'alun de Rome, XV^e-XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1962), pp. 89 f.; R. De Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank, 1397-1494* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 221-2, 258, 365-7; R. Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, trans. C. Grayson (London, 1959), p. 234.

could not have survived merely because no-one had thought it worth knocking down. Spanish envoys nourished their counter-myths, their tales of Venetian tyranny, their ominous reports of the developing tension between the poles of rich and poor, their harsh, unkindly scrutinies of the myth of Venetian liberty.¹ But it was this myth that lived on with the state itself, immobile, inscrutable, passive, paradoxically blending a soft, effeminate luxury with an extraordinary resistance to the normal processes of decay. And the historian of Venice may envy the historian of rebellion, for at least his rebels make some attempt to say what they are revolting about; and we have no statement from the humble people of Venice (or even from its noble lumpenproletarians) which can make it clear to us why, at conscious or unconscious level, they chose to accept so long and so uncomplainingly so rigid, so exclusive and so neurotically watchful a regime.

¹ For less complimentary accounts of Venice see British Museum, Additional MS.5471, *Relatione universa delle cose di Venetia fatta da Don Alonso della Cueva ambascadore di Spagna hoggi Cardinale*, and I. Raulich, "Una relazione del Marchese di Bedmar sui Veneziani", *Nuovo Archivio Veneto*, xvi (1898).