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DAVID FREEDBERG
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Image and Insight

EDITED BY
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As a powerful icon of ancien régime political values, Venice has at times been a site of significant iconoclastic aggression. The invasion of the French revolutionary army on 15 May 1797 brought the Venetian Republic’s independence to an end after roughly a thousand years. The subsequent French-Austrian Treaty of Campo Formio turned Venice over to the Austrian empire, but not before Napoleonic forces unleashed their revolutionary iconoclasm. They sacked churches and private residences, and purposefully destroyed Venetian political symbols: the winged lion, the representation of Venice’s patron St Mark, was pulled down from its column on the Piazzetta and sent to Paris, as was the Triumphal Quadriga, the four bronze horses which had been brought to Venice as plunder from Constantinople after the Fourth Crusade of 1204 and were displayed on the loggia of the Basilica di San Marco. The Golden Book, which contained the names and lineages of the patriciate; the doge’s insignia; and his ceremonial boat, the bucintoro, were all burned.

In 1910, the city was again subjected to a vehement attack, this time by the Futurists, who advocated its wholesale destruction and the construction of a new, industrially driven metropolis. The Futurist iconoclasts described Venice ‘as an idealized city in a state of ruin’, the perfect target for their attacks on bourgeois European culture. On the evening of 8 July 1910, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944) and several of his colleagues climbed to the top of the clock tower on Piazza San Marco to bombard passers-by with some eighty thousand copies of Marinetti’s pamphlet, Contro Venezia passatista. Down below, astonished Venetians, crossing the piazza on their way home for supper, could read Marinetti’s vehement appeal:

Let us fill the stinking little canals with the rubble of the tottering infected old palaces. Let us burn the gondolas, rocking chairs for idiots, and raise to the sky the majestic geometry of metal bridges and smoke-crowned factories, abolishing the sagging curves of ancient buildings.

That same year, on a Sunday when mass in the Basilica di San Marco had ended and people were streaming out of the church, Marinetti appeared again, with a megaphone in hand, shouting anti-Venetian and anticlerical abuse. For the Futurists the city of Venice was a symbol of 'a hated and repressive order' that needed to be overthrown.5

Far from actually relegating Faliero to oblivion, the dramatic black interruption in the long line of portraits actively and dramatically reminded spectators of his betrayal and subsequent fate.9 The pre-modern situation, then, seems to conform to the prevailing image of Venice as a city-state of exceptional social and political stability, immune to internal violence or iconoclasm. Until the invasion of French troops, Venice remained la Serenissima, the most serene Republic.10

Venetian humanists initiated and propagated the mythical image of an unwalled yet unconquered city, its society organized around a strict socio-political hierarchy and immune to internal strife. According to this myth, wise and benevolent patricians or nobili (roughly five percent of the population) governed the city-state and its dominions; a devoted secondary elite, the cittadini, fulfilled most bureaucratic duties, thus forming the state's stable backbone, as patricians rotated in and out of office. The rest of the city's inhabitants, roughly eighty percent, were the popolani. Primarily involved in the guilds and trades, their social and economic standing could vary widely, from merchants who surpassed many a poor patrician in wealth to gondoliers and fishermen. Officially, the popolani had no political role other than that of powerless content subjects. Venice thus seems the epitome of functionalism: a system of interconnected parts, working together harmoniously to maintain a state of social equilibrium, with the elite providing for, and thus pacifying, ordinary Venetians.11

5. Marinetti's more farcical actions were 'accompanied by a call for less humouristic activities—namely street-fighting in the ruins of the city—which, when coupled with the political terminology of urban "reconquering" reflected not only the changing identity of Venice but also an emerging Fascist identity among many artists in Italy', Noyes, The Politics of Iconoclasm, p. 122.


Another interpretation of Venice’s social stability takes a different tack, forming the mirror image of the Serenissima myth. This view, advanced since the Renaissance by non-Venetian observers such as Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Jean Bodin (1530–96), holds that Venice is a repressive, tyrannical, and secretive state. This anti-myth claims that the Venetian political elite exacted social stability mainly through oppression. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) cited his (unsuccessful) stay as secretary of the French ambassador between September 1743 and August 1744 as the inspiration for composing what would become his Contrat Social.13 As Rousseau wrote in his autobiography, he studied the complex workings of the Republic’s system of government and came to the conclusion that, behind the republican façade, the patrician regime was despotic and secretive. The executive councils deliberated behind closed doors, and the whole system relied heavily on a system of secret informers. Rousseau came away from Venice with a profound distrust of government bureaucracy and disgust for the Venetian regime’s corrupting influence on its people. All in all, the experience prompted him to think of a better, more honest, and more legitimate way to govern. This representation of Venice endures, as shown by a recent article in Past and Present on subversive speech in medieval Flanders, whose authors contrast rebellious cities such as Bruges and Ghent with Venice, where, they argue, relative calm persisted because mormorazioni (political grumblings and rumours) were crushed by ‘the doge and his army of spies’.14

Whether viewing Venice from the perspective of the myth or the anti-myth, one thing that is never questioned is the inherent social stability and the popolani’s lack of political power. Popular politics have become an accepted and integral element of the historiography of pre-modern Europe, but in a comparative context Venice continues to function as the exception to the rule.15 My aim here is to examine the aggressive reactions to the coronation of Doge Leonardo Donà (1536–1612) in 1606, drawing on the work of David Freedberg and others on iconoclasm. Ultimately, I want to argue that the persistent notion of social stability and absence of political violence in Venice has obscured our view of popular participation in Venetian civic ceremonies and politics.

Doge Leonardo Donà

On 11 January 1606, the day after he was elected as Venice’s ninetieth doge, Leonardo Donà made his triumphal circuit around the Piazza San Marco. In sharp contrast to the smooth and uncomplicated procedure that had seen him elected doge the day before, it quickly devolved into a chaotic, even violent, event.16 (Fig. 1) When the eighty-ninth


13. See Book IX of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Les confessions. I want to thank Barbara Carnevali, one of my colleagues at the Italian Academy during my fellowship in 2013, for alerting me to this passage in Rousseau’s autobiography. On Rousseau’s Venetian stay, see Maurice Cranston, Jean-Jacques. The Early Life of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712–1754 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 169–92.


Fig. 1. Jan van Halbeek, Portrait of Doge Leonardo Donà, 1606. Engraving, 175 × 125 mm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
dooge, Marino Grimani (1532–1605), died on 25 December 1605, the seventy-year-old Donà was his most obvious successor. Donà had lost narrowly to Grimani in the previous election in 1595, after a long and drawn-out voting procedure. Realizing after seventy ballots that he could not arrive at the necessary majority of votes, Donà withdrew his candidacy, paving the way for Grimani’s election. Still, his election had been ‘met and received with great applause by all the orders of the city’. Yet as a crew of Arsenalotti (workers from the state shipyard) carried him in the special ducal palanquin (pozzetto) around the snow-covered Piazza, it quickly became clear that Donà had overestimated—or overstated—his approval ratings, at least among the lower Venetian ‘orders’. Instead of applauding him, the gathered crowds pelted their new head of state first with snowballs and then with paving stones. The scene was chaotic, with some of the projectiles hitting the pozzetto and narrowly missing the doge. What triggered the stoning of Doge Donà?

Ducal ceremonies and other forms of civic ritual play a central role in the story of Venice’s stability: they have often been interpreted as simultaneously expressing and enhancing the Serenissima ideal. In his influential study Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice, Edward Muir argues that ducal funerals and other rituals formed the cornerstone of a shared Venetian identity, thus facilitating popular acceptance of patrician rule. Yet the violence towards Donà indicates that ducal popularity and popular acquiescence were not a given.

Disruptive rituals and ritualized violence have been a central focus of historiography since the late 1960s. Following E. P. Thompson’s work on the eighteenth-century English crowd and Mikhail Bakhtin’s interpretation of carnival, Peter Burke, Natalie Zemon Davis, and many others have analysed riotous rituals and ritualized riots.

17. Donà had been one of the forty-one patrician electors (the Quarantuno, as the electoral council was known). Although formally patricians could not put themselves up as candidates, informally they could communicate their position, especially when they were part of the Forty-One. On the conclusive election of 1595, see Maartje van Gelder, ‘The People’s Prince. Popular Politics in Early Modern Venice’, Journal of Modern History, 90.2 (2018), 1–43. This article originated as a paper I gave while a fellow at the Italian Academy.

18. In general, Venetians preferred their head of state to be old but not decrepit, so that his time in office would be naturally limited; and preferably without sons, to limit the risk of dynastic aspirations. Ugo Tucci, ‘I meccanismi delle elezione ducale’, in I dogi, ed. by Gino Benzonì (Milan: Electa, 1982), pp. 116–18.


21. Biblioteca Museo Correr, 759, carta 94. ‘Mentre [Donà] era portato per Piazza nella nave, o pozzo, dalle Maestranze dell’Arsenal […] molti ragazzi principiarono trá loro à buttare delle balle di neve, non contentandosi vennero à sassi, il che causò al quanto tumulto’. See also the chronicle of Giovanni Carlo Sivos, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Ms. It VII, 1818 (9436), carta 87: ‘et fù portato attorno la Piazza S. Marco, quale fu fatta netta dalla neve caduta il giorno avanti, et tornò nel Palazzo, senza mai gettar danari al Populo, ma ben li nepoti ne gettorono, se bene puochi. Per il che la plebe, che aspettava avidamente una quantità de denari come fù al tempo del Dose Grimani, restarono contaminati, et fra loro s’azzufarono col tirarsi della neve, per il che ne gionse anco qualche palla al pergamano di detto Dose, segno non troppo buono.’


Within a Venetian context, the famous fist fights (pugni) on bridges in the city's working-class areas have been studied as a ritualized form of popular violence: the pugni were a safety valve, officially prohibited but condoned to allow popolano workers to let off steam. Yet there are indications, and the disruption of Donà's coronation counts among them, that the involvement of popolani in Venetian politics went much further than tolerated moments to vent political anger and frustration in peripheral parts of the city. The outbreak of violence against Donà took place during one of the most important state ceremonies, right on Piazza San Marco, the political and religious heart of the Republic. To better understand popular aggression against Donà we should first take another look at Venice's ducal election procedure.

**ELECTING THE DOGE**

Ducal funeral rituals were formal celebrations of republican values, stressing the mortality and transience of individual doges while highlighting the durability of the Venetian state. The doge's body was stripped of his symbols of office: his gold ring and stamp for the ducal seals were smashed and his crown removed. His administrative authority passed to the remaining members of the Signoria, the ruling body of the Republic, who moved into the Ducal Palace for the vacancy's duration.

Venice's new head of state was chosen by an electoral college comprised of forty-one experienced patricians. The Quarant'uno were selected in nine alternating stages of voting and sortition, a procedure that balanced chance with political interest, allowing the most powerful patricians to participate in the electoral college and hence influence the ducal election. A new doge was elected with a majority of twenty-five votes during the conclave in the Ducal Palace. During the election it was essential to project patrician unanimity and thus give the doge, who lacked a monarch's divine right to rule, the necessary authority. Formally, electing a doge in pre-modern Venice was an exclusively patrician affair. Yet this had not always been the case. During the earliest period of the Republic all free Venetian men had a vote in the ducal election, but their role had been progressively reduced to post-electoral applauding spectators at the coronation ceremonies. As we have seen, however, ordinary Venetians did not always follow this script.

Venice’s ducal elections are in many ways comparable to papal elections in Rome, with important differences. First of all, the election of a new pope by the College of Cardinals was always influenced by powerful monarchs and international politics, whereas the procedure in Venice was a strictly patrician affair. Secondly, in papal Rome civic councils took charge during the interregnum, which could last months; in Venice, on the other hand, the ducal vacancy brought about the virtual shutdown of the state, as meetings of major councils, such as the Senate and the Council of Ten, were suspended. The vacanza ducale was supposed to be short: in the sixteenth century it took electoral colleges on average five and a half days to appoint a new head of state.


28. See also van Gelder, 'The People’s Prince'.


A third point of contrast, connected to the second, concerns the element of disorder. Violence during vacancies of power is often interpreted using Victor Turner’s notion of liminality. In Rome, violence was an almost integral part of the sede vacante: the freedom of the vacant see allowed Romans to criticize and abuse deceased popes, especially those judged to have failed in providing good government. These collective protests often took the form of ritual iconoclastic assaults on the papal statues in the Conservators’ Palace at the Capitoline Hill after their deaths, a way to vent and to blacken pope’s names and tarnish their memory. The statues were gifts from the popolo romano, and as such could be taken back or destroyed. This was the case after the death of Paul IV (1476–1559) in 1559, Sixtus V (1521–90) in 1590, and Urban VIII (1568–1644) in 1644. As John Hunt has emphasised recently, the Conservators’ Palace formed the ‘heart of the communal government’s territory, which […] had been the receptacle of the republican tradition and focus of rebellion since the fourteenth century’.33

During the ducal vacancy of 1605–06, the theologian Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623), who would become Venice’s advocate during the Interdict conflict of 1606–07, explicitly contrasted the sede vacante and unrest in Rome with the stability of the Venetian state during the ducal vacancy. Sarpi pointed out that during the Roman vacant see, novità, which in an early modern context meant not just novelties, but also political changes and instability, occurred, but that ‘the government of the Republic does not change with a new doge or the interregnum, but remains completely and totally fermo e stabile’, a statement intended to highlight the Serenissima ideal by suppressing the popular unrest and political instability that surrounded ducal elections.34

**Doge as Imago**

As princes in a republic, late medieval and early modern doges held a paradoxical position: they were not allowed to express dynastic aspirations, and a set of laws, adjusted during each interregnum, regulated their position. As Dennis Romano has written, the ‘paucity of renowned doges was largely a fulfilment of a calculated strategy on the part of Venice’s ruling elite’.35 Overt displays of individualism were discouraged, and although there was plenty of religious imagery on the streets, statues of public figures in Venetian urban space were a rarity.36 Patrician families and doges advertised their status through funerary monuments and statues in churches and through patronage of architecture. Obviously, the absence of statues of public figures entailed an absence of targets for symbolic acts of destruction when leaders fell out of favour: with no images of wood and stone there seemed to be no opportunities for communal catharsis through symbolic acts of destruction, as for instance happened in Rome.

Yet despite the limitations on overt displays of ducal power and ducal individualism, the doge was Venice’s chief republican magistrate and the ‘earthly representative of Venice’s patron Saint Mark’. As Romano has argued in his study of Doge Francesco Foscari (1373–1457), *The Likeness of Venice*, contemporary political discourse about the doge focused on the concept of ‘imago’, understood

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34. Paolo Sarpi, *Opere varie del molto reverendo padre F. Paolo Sarpi dell’ordine de’ Servi di Maria Teologo consultore della Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia* (Helmstat [i.e., Venice]: Jacopo Mulleri, 1750), p. 11.


as likeness and personification. A doge embodied the Republic: he ‘was like an icon, transmitting the power of St Mark to his people’.37 As an icon, though, he could be on the receiving end of iconoclastic outbursts, as happened to Donà during the 1606 coronation.

The ritual of the Venetian ducal coronation consisted of a three-stage ceremony that had developed over the centuries. First, the most senior member of the electoral college presented the new doge to the Venetian people in the Basilica di San Marco. Then a crew of Arsenalotti carried the new doge on the pozetto out of the basilica and into the Piazza San Marco for the sparsio, the tossing of specially minted coins to the people. The sparsio had developed over the centuries to channel the medieval saccheggi rituali, which in Venice consisted of the spoliazione of the new doge and the sacking of his family palace.38 The third and final stage was the actual coronation on the Scala dei Giganti, the stairs in the courtyard of the Ducal Palace. (Fig. 2)

According to various Venetian chroniclers, Donà encountered unfortunate mishaps and outbursts of popular discontent at all three of the 1606 ceremony’s stages. A series of almost absurd incidents took place at the end of Donà’s presentation in the basilica. The Arsenalotti carried him out to the Piazza but, as they left the church, failed for some reason to lower the pozetto sufficiently. As a result, instead of projecting his newly acquired ducal dignity, Donà hit his head on his own coat of arms, hung above the church’s doorway, which then fell to the ground. The actual coronation was marred by yet another incident.

At the top of the Scala dei Giganti the youngest member of the Forty-one traditionally crowned the doge with the white linen skull-cap (camauro) before placing the actual crown or corno on his head. As Donà knelted to be crowned, the camauro was placed the wrong way around on his head and then a large pearl affixed to the front of the crown fell off.39 These incidents were interpreted as bad omens but, as we have seen, things got worse during the sparsio, when Donà was pelted with snowballs and stones. Not every doge faced such popular aggression, which is why we cannot interpret the stoning of the doge as a customary rite of violence or part of deeply rooted patterns of popular violence. Instead, let us attend to the specific political meanings and contingent elements.40

The aggression towards Donà stemmed from his unwillingness to engage in displays of public generosity. His predecessor, Marino Grimani, had throughout his career been exceptionally munificent, to the point of angering his fellow patricians. In republican Rome, giving was a necessary component of political display: every notable was required to show generosity by organizing games for the plebs and establishing patronage relations through symbolic gifts to supporters.41 In republican Venice, however, individual patricians who gave too much or too freely raised suspicion precisely because such actions could be instrumental in building a clientele. Due to attempts to curtail private initiatives, Venetian distribution of charity was increasingly relegated to state-backed institutions during the sixteenth century.42 But Grimani had

39. BNM, Ms. It VII, 1818 (9436), carta 87v and BMC, 759, carta 94.
flouted these rules and, contrary to all the official scripts, had been elected on a wave of popular enthusiasm—to the dismay of Donà, who deemed it a form of populism unacceptable in a republic. 43

Donà used his own sparsio in 1606 to underline his frugal ideals: during the procession, his three nephews threw some coins to the onlookers, while the doge himself abstained. This angered the people and, far from remaining passive, they inverted the symbolic choreography of the sparsio by throwing snowballs and stones. 44

Leonardo Donà’s relationship with the Venetian people continued to be distinctly icy. Six years after his election, during a procession in February 1612, Donà was taunted by people in the crowd shouting, ‘Viva, viva il doge Grimani’ as he passed them, invoking the memory of his more charitable predecessor. The offended Donà vowed never again to participate in a public ceremony, thereby effectively short-circuiting the prime expression of Venetian political hierarchy. He did not even participate in the annual Redentore procession, held every July since the plague of 1575–77 to celebrate the city’s deliverance from the epidemic and one of the highlights in the Venetian ceremonial calendar. According to one chronicler, when the people saw that the doge was absent during the Redentore festival, ‘everyone started to

43. Van Gelder, ‘The People’s Prince’.
44. BNM, Ms. II VII, 1818 (9436), carta 87–88; ‘et fù portato attorno la Piazza S. Marco, quale fù fatta netta dalla neve caduta il giorno avanti, et tornò nel Palazzo, senza mai gettar danari al Populo, ma ben li Nepoti ne gittorno, se bene puochi. Per il che la plebe, che aspettava una quantità de denari, come fù al tempo del Dose Grimani restorno contaminati.’
murmur and said as with one voice, “There will come a day when he will want to go to church, but won’t be able to”. The following day Donà died.45

Donà was not the only doge targeted during official rituals. Doge Pietro Loredan (1482–1570) died at the beginning of May 1570, as Venice went through a period of extreme famine, marked by grain riots and attacks on bread shops. Eight months earlier, in September 1569, an explosion had destroyed the Arsenal while at the same time the military encroachment of the Ottomans, which would result in their conquest of Cyprus in 1570, increased. The Signoria anxiously tried to postpone the announcement of Loredan’s death because he ‘had a most evil reputation, since he was held responsible for the famine, for the many deaths, for the war, and for the dreadful fire at the Arsenal’. This allowed for some time to take security measures: ‘On the day his death was proclaimed the gates of the palace were shut, and guards composed of men from the Arsenal were posted there in the customary fashion’.46 Loredan’s funeral ceremony was held on Sunday 7 May.

As part of the traditional funeral rites, a doge’s corpse was raised nine times in the great doorway of the Basilica di San Marco. As Loredan’s body was raised for the eighth time, the crowd shouted ‘Et otto, L’è morto il Dose del Meiotto’ (‘And that is eight! The Millet Doge is dead!’). The procession had already left San Marco for the ceremonial circuit towards the church of San Giovanni e Paolo, where the funerary mass would be held, when word trickled back to the Signoria that caused the procession to be halted. At San Giovanni e Paolo, ‘some 400 men’ awaited Loredan’s funeral procession, ‘equipped with millet loaves, ready to throw the loaves at his corpse, and drag him along on his bier’. Millet, a lesser grain, had been used in bread during the winter—an unpopular move. To avoid the ducal corpse being pelted with pieces of what would have been hard bread, the procession was hastily rerouted back to San Marco. The city remained in something of an uproar: day and night people could be heard shouting, ‘The millet doge, who had the bakers sell the millet loaf, the millet doge is dead!’47 The violence aimed at the corpse of Loredan was an expression of popular anger over issues of good governance and provisioning.

An even bigger upheaval took place at a ducal coronation seventy years later, with an even more profound political impact. In 1676, after it became apparent that an unpopular candidate, Giovanni Sagredo (1616–91), had the necessary votes to become doge, some sixty boatmen started throwing paving stones at his supporters. This outburst of plebeian violence resulted in a riot in the Piazza which, according to contemporary reports, was instigated by Sagredo’s patrician rivals. The Great Council intervened by changing the composition of the electoral council: only a few hours after the final ballot, Sagredo’s election as doge was annulled.48

These examples offer a glimpse of moments of political protest in Venice, often aimed at the doge. As the icon or image of the Republic, doges could become the target of words of abuse, but also of outright attacks. To express their discontent with government policies or, as in the case of Donà, a doge’s stance on issues of charity and provisioning, the Venetian crowd focused its iconoclastic fury

45. BNM, Ms. It VII, 1818 (9436), carta 188: ‘vedendosi mal voluto dal suo popolo, tanto più che, essendo stato questo mese di Febraro a Santa Maria Formosa, secondo l’ordinario con la signoria, ove li Fanciulli, et anco quasi tutto il populo li dettero una romanzina gagliarda, gridando ad alta voce viva, viva il Dose Grimani Padre dei Poveri, per la qual causa da quel giorno in poi non volse egli più andar in alcuna processione, et gran miracolo, che la 2a Domenica del presente mese andò la Signoria al Redentore giusta l’ordinario, et quando il populo nol vidde tutti murmurando ad una voce dicevano, vorrà egli andar in Chiesa, che non potràn e poi la seguente mattina, che fù il Lunedì 16 di Luglio morisse come di sioram senza potersi chiamare in colpa’.


47. Chambers and Pullan, Venice, p. 113.

on the figure of the doge himself. Behind the stoning of Donà, Loredan, and the riot against Sagredo loom larger questions. What impact did popular protest have on the Venetian political system? Why have these violent events not been taken seriously in Venetian historiography? And were alliances struck between popular and elite Venetians? It is always assumed that Venetian nobles, unlike their Florentine and Genoese peers, did not form neighbourhood powerbases, but we know little about the actual intersections of patrician and popolano lives. 49 In the end, instead of accounting for Venetian government ritual as a dependably stabilizing factor, we need to take into account that it also offered ideal moments and places to channel popular collective acts of iconoclasm towards the image of the state: the doge. Indeed, to damage symbols of power is to diminish the power itself. 50

49. On the absence of neighbourhood powerbases, see Dennis Romano, ‘Charity and Community in Early Renaissance Venice’, *Journal of Urban History*, 11 (1984), 63–82 (p. 81).
