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### [Review of: R. Mackenney (2019) Venice as the Polity of Mercy: Guilds, Confraternities and the Social Order, c. 1250–c.1650]

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RICHARD MACKENNEY. *Venice as the Polity of Mercy: Guilds, Confraternities and the Social Order, c. 1250–c. 1650*. Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Toronto Press, 2019. Pp. xviii, 471. Cloth \$90.00.

Political stability and a lack of popular discontent have always formed key elements in the history of the Venetian Republic. In contrast to other late medieval and early modern city-states that had to deal with riots and revolt on a regular basis, Venice seemed immune to contestation. According to this celebratory narrative, first propagated by early modern Venetian humanists, a strict sociopolitical hierarchy consisting of three orders formed the basis for Venetian stability: a benevolent patriciate governed the city-state and its dominions, the citizens (*cittadini*) class formed a de-

voted secondary elite in charge of bureaucratic duties, and ordinary Venetians (*popolani*) were politically powerless but content. Scholars of Venice have thoroughly examined this traditional image of the politically stable and socially harmonious *Serenissima*, exposing it as a myth fabricated by patricians to promote their own institutions. The image of Venice as a static, patrician-dominated society has been challenged convincingly over the last fifty years or so: work on the patriciate has revealed the internal dynamics and tensions within this class, while innovative studies on the lives of guild members, Arsenal workers, household servants, and *popolano* women—groups once considered marginal—have given us a much richer portrayal of Venetian society. Richard Mackenney's book *Venice as the Polity of Mercy: Guilds, Confraternities and the Social Order, c. 1250–c. 1650* fits in this latter tradition. Mackenney aims to investigate Venetian political and social order “from the point of view of those allegedly excluded” (8). By focusing on the political and, especially, social roles of guilds, confraternities, and other corporations, he wants to show how Venetian commoners attempted to protect themselves and their families from changing economic conditions.

Previous studies, including Mackenney's own *Tradesmen and Traders: The World of the Guilds in Venice and Europe, c. 1250–c. 1650* (1987), have portrayed Venetian guilds and confraternities as instrumental in maintaining the social and political status quo. Whereas guilds in Florence or the cities in medieval Brabant and Flanders, for example, were often vehicles for political protest and turmoil, such was not the case in Venice. Here, in contrast, the state effectively controlled the guilds, rendering them powerless. In his foundational *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: The Social Institutions of a Catholic State to 1620* (1971), Brian Pullan analyzed Venetian confraternities as an integral part of Venice's charitable structure, and thus essential in the daily maintenance of the social order. Mackenney builds on Pullan's work but casts his net wider: he not only focuses on the so-called *Scuole Grandi*—the six prestigious religious brotherhoods that developed between the late thirteenth and sixteenth centuries—but also on the numerous trade guilds and smaller, less high-status confraternities.

Mackenney's study not only goes beyond the more prestigious corporations but also convincingly challenges the long-held notion of total state control. Mackenney shows that the state's oversight was never as effective or encompassing as previously assumed and that members of guilds and confraternities had significant self-determination. This is an important contribution to the existing literature. To be sure, Mackenney does not see the corporations operating outside the government's reach nor does he see them as engaged in an endless dialectic struggle, but he does show how guilds could challenge or defy government decisions.

Mackenney's book, moreover, nuances our understanding of the *Scuole Grandi*. Scholars have usually seen the *Scuole* as distinct from other, smaller charitable confraternities. Mackenney, however, emphasizes that the differences between these organizations were less pronounced than their similarities. This allows him to show and compare how devotional confraternities, but also confraternities linked to specific trade guilds and much more informal “self-help groups,” provided support to their members. Here Mackenney focuses on the religious concept of mercy or misericordia as part of the confraternal support system and devotional tradition. I appreciated his attempt to integrate the Venetian iconography of mercy in his analysis.

All in all, the book conveys a more dynamic and messier depiction of Venetian society, while giving those Venetians “supposedly shut out of public life” (7) center stage. Yet the book does suffer from certain imbalances. Mackenney has taken on the daunting task of covering four centuries, with the added difficulty that for much of the period before 1500 there is precious little source material. For the earlier centuries, he can mainly rely on the statutes of the corporations, which inevitably emphasize the prescriptive. Yet even these statutes can give us a glimpse of the at times disorderly and (infra-)political acts of members. For instance, the statute of the Saint Agnes confraternity, established in 1325, stipulated that members could be expelled for playing dice and for public adultery; members were also forbidden to speak in a derogatory manner of the doge and the commune (83). Whereas Mackenney mentions these rules, they could also raise the question whether, and also how, guilds and confraternity members challenged the political status quo. The material is more abundant for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Throughout the book Mackenney refers to Stephen Greenblatt's idea of “the circulation of social energy,” a rather broad concept that Greenblatt used to explore the relationship between society and literature in Renaissance England. Mackenney takes it as referring to the continuous interaction between political, economic, and religious change, but it isn't clear what this concept contributes to his analysis. Overall, Mackenney shows that Venetian *popolani* were self-sufficient, though never far from poverty. He brings to the fore a dense network of confraternities and other corporations, providing assistance and benevolence. Ultimately, in a more nuanced version of Pullan's conclusion, Mackenney sees this non-elite network of reciprocity—and not patrician benevolence—as the reason for the Venetian Republic's longevity. This conclusion, and especially its focus on Venetian commoners, fits the current developments in Venetian studies. Although the book clearly is based on an impressive amount of research conducted over a long period of time, it is a pity that Mackenney has not engaged with

the most recent studies on Venetian *popolani* as social and political actors, especially the work by scholars such as Claire Judde de Larivière, Massimo Rospocher, and Rosa Salzberg. Finally, more thorough copyediting might have eliminated some of this book's idiosyncrasies, such as appendices that pop up in the middle of the book.

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