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TOWN PLANNING REVIEW

Special issue: What are the impacts of the changes?

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**Special issue:
What are the impacts of the changes?**

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Ludovico Centis

Viewpoint

Spies, viruses and vaporetti: how the pandemic increases distances in the Venice lagoon

Two epochal images of St Mark's Square in Venice have recently been impressed upon our collective memory. The first was that of a space saturated not by the oft-mistreated tourists, but by the exceptionally high tide of 12 November 2019 and those that followed with unusual frequency in the days after. The second is that of an empty square due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on movement that were imposed by the Italian government from the beginning of March 2020 to limit the spread of the infection. The first image is linked to long-term ecological dynamics and, despite all its brutality, it has become and remains somewhat familiar. We all have – though some experienced it in person and others witnessed its effects in archival images – the flood of 1966 in our eyes; we are all aware of the MoSE project and the scandal associated with it; we are all conscious of the environmental crisis that is affecting the planet and the potentially catastrophic consequences it could have. The second image, however, is connected with unexpected events that caught us off guard and, with the exception of the few who remember the Spanish flu pandemic that occurred between 1918 and 1920, opened up a swathe of completely new emotional and social scenarios. These scenarios are all the more disturbing as the uncertainty rate associated with the virus is high – virologists and scientists are having to gradually learn about it as the situation unfolds in real time.

Among the few facts that we know about COVID-19 is that its first victims were taken in the Chinese city of Wuhan. The date of the first infection has been traced back with some degree of precision to early November in 2019. However, even if the place and start date of this pandemic that has now hit the entire planet have been clearly defined,¹ the exact cause of its origin is still uncertain. In recent months a vast range of differing hypotheses have been proposed and disseminated through both mass media and social media platforms. While known virologists have claimed that the virus is undoubtedly of natural origin (Adnkronos, 2020), a plethora of others

¹ Recently some scholars of the University of Cambridge have instead hypothesised that the infection began in September 2019 in the south of the People's Republic of China and that the virus then evolved into three different strains. See Osborne (2020).

VENEZIA E LIDO

ACQUA ALTA E CORONAVIRUS CARNEVALE CON IL CROLLO DEI TURISTI

LA SENTENZA

**ARTIGIANO COPIA LE MASCHERE
DEI FUMETTI: CONDANNATO**

IL GAZZETTINO

Figure 1 Poster of the local newspaper *Il Gazzettino*. The title reads: 'High water and coronavirus collapse of tourism during Carnival' Source: *Il Gazzettino*

– trolls, conspiracy theorists, political analysts, members of government staff, Nobel laureates – around the world, from the People's Republic of China to the United States, have insinuated responsibility and attempted to denigrate or damage adverse entities. Citing just a few of the posts and videos that I have encountered in recent weeks, the culprit at the root of the infection has variously been the Chinese government, the American government, the CIA and an aggressive hedge fund. France and the United Kingdom have also recently joined the two largest 'litigants' (the People's Republic of China and the United States of America) and accused the Chinese of a lack of transparency in their management of the crisis (BBC News, 2020).

Undoubtedly, the assignment of responsibility for the origin of the pandemic is highly significant geopolitically, and we can be sure that there is an intense amount of intelligence work and a broad deployment of soft power by the various nations concerned in order to advance the narrative that is most useful to each. At this point, it is interesting to return to the initial subject of this discourse: Venice. Not so much for the fact that the Republic of Venice was among the first modern states



Figure 2 Still image from video of *vaporetti* disinfection

Source: Courtesy of ACTV

to create a complex espionage system, but for the fact that in the fifteenth century the Serenissima developed an avant-garde health organisation that pushed the city to practise a 'new custom of international morality: that of taking part in health warnings also to commercial competitors and political adversaries'.² According to this custom, ordinary citizens, health officials of the areas under Venetian control and foreign consuls and diplomats were obliged to inform the authorities about suspected diseases and the deaths of men and animals. On the one hand, the historian Paolo Preto highlights the absolute modernity and relevance of this legislation. On the other, however, he points out that this often found

an insurmountable limit in the 'raison d'état' which recommends minimizing or even denying suspicions or reality of epidemics, that would cause commercial blocks and therefore significant economic and political damage; after all, Venice itself, when facing an epidemic of plague in its territory plays for time and procrastinates until the last an official communication to other governments because it fears commercial blockades or, as in 1576, Turkish aggressions. (Preto, 447)

2 Translation by the author. See Cipolla (1976, 48), and Selmi (1979, 31). Quoted in Preto (2016, 447).



Figure 3 Still image from video of *vaporetti* disinfection
Source: Courtesy of ACTV

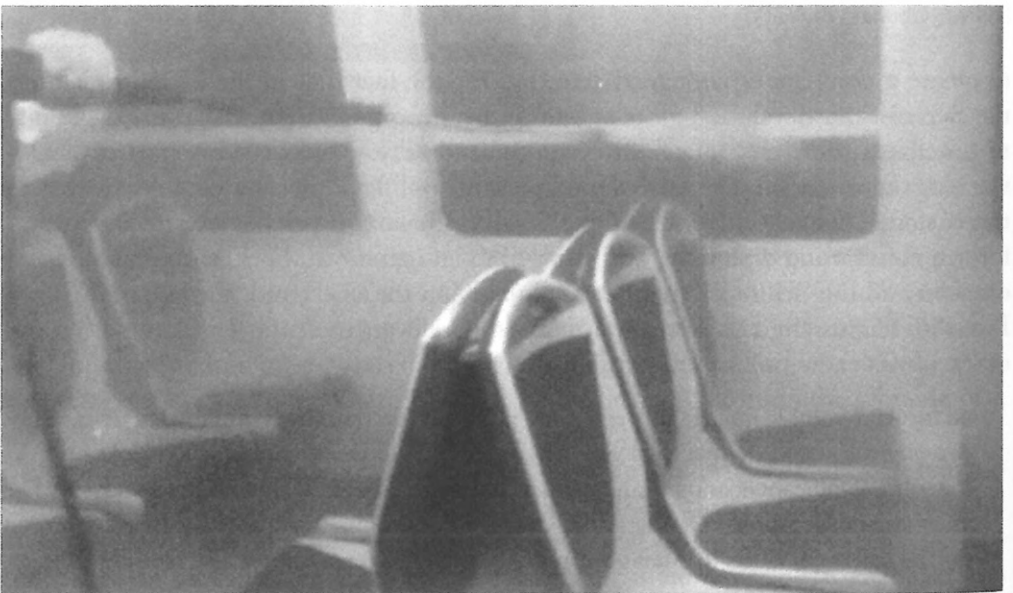


Figure 4 Still image from video of *vaporetti* disinfection
Source: Courtesy of ACTV

His words sound tremendously current, particularly in a nation like Italy, wherein procrastination is a centuries-old practice, a real political custom.

Without calling into question the complex decisions that have been taken, such as the establishment of 'red areas' and the blocking of non-essential economic activities, it is enough to remember how the Venetian and regional city authorities of the Veneto region were slow to react. The Venice Carnival, a potentially very risky event given the circumstances, was cancelled very late; in fact, the city was only closed for Shrove Tuesday and the main party was allowed to take place on Saturday 21 February 2020. It would be ungenerous, though, to attribute such behaviour only to this area or even to Italy alone. Unfortunately, we have seen how, all over the world, from China to Europe to the Americas, the same attitude has, with few exceptions, been cyclically adopted by politicians and economic actors. Key decisions have been postponed until the health situation is already serious; production chains have more or less been explicitly pressured to remain functioning; conflicting orders and opinions have been expressed at various administrative levels. Only time will tell who has worked wisely and who has made the wrong choices; who has managed to best preserve the life and health of citizens; and who has been able to combine containment – or the desired complete prevention – of contagion and the resumption of economic, social and cultural activities. Today, however – as often happens during periods of intense crisis – we can reflect on some facts that evidence the dynamics and problems that existed before the crisis itself. In the case of the Venetian metropolitan area, these facts are basically two, and are related to the phenomenon of overflowing tourism and the imbalances that it has caused, as well as the polarisation of the residential population and economic and productive activities in this area.

The first fact, known to most, is that the historic centre is totally economically dependent on tourism. Already heavily affected by the floods of November 2019, its activity and production are now paralysed completely. Hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, guest houses, Airbnb rentals, tourist guides and gondoliers are at the extreme limit of financial survival, and their recovery is likely to be very slow. The second fact is that the local public transport is also almost entirely reliant on tourism in order to be sustainable. ACTV, the municipal company for public transport, was forced to considerably cut their services, in particular the vaporetti. Though this is a phenomenon common to other Italian and non-Italian cities where a significant portion of the population has been forced to stay in their home other than for reasons of extreme necessity, in Venice it highlights peculiar demographic, occupational and social dynamics. On the one hand, the overcrowded morning and evening buses – which are obviously dangerous epidemiologically – that take workers to the factories are still operational in Porto Marghera. On the other, the vaporetti often travel empty, and they connect to a historic centre with just over 50,000 inhabitants, the highest seniority rate in Italy and islands that are gradually depopulating. Addressing this

VENEZIA E LAGO

**L'ASSESSORE:
ACTV COSI' REGGE
SOLO 12 MESI
MENO CORSE
DOPO L'EPIDEMIA**

**CONTROLLI DI PASQUA
LAGUNA BLINDATA
CONTRO LE GITE**

IL GAZZETTINO

Figure 5 Poster of the local newspaper *Il Gazzettino*. The title reads: 'The councillor: ACTV thus only holds 12 months - Less runs after the pandemic'

Source: *Il Gazzettino*

imbalance (ACTV, 2020) therefore varies between two extremes: the frequency of all services could be reduced – which would effectively further isolate those in the more peripheral areas of the historic centre and the lagoon – or maintained – thus generating a significant economic deficit for which local administrators have indicated their intention to ask for funds from the national government to alleviate.

The councillor for mobility of the Municipality of Venice, Renato Boraso, has already tried to break his fall:

In May we will evaluate with the Councillor for the Budget whether we can move some resources and make corrections but it will be very difficult because we do not only have the transport to cover, there are our other companies in total paralysis, see the Casino. And users will have to change habits, they will no longer be able get the service that was available before the pandemic, simply because it will be unsustainable economically ... Even after the emergency ends there will be fewer trips, fewer services and less frequency. (Trevisan, 2020)

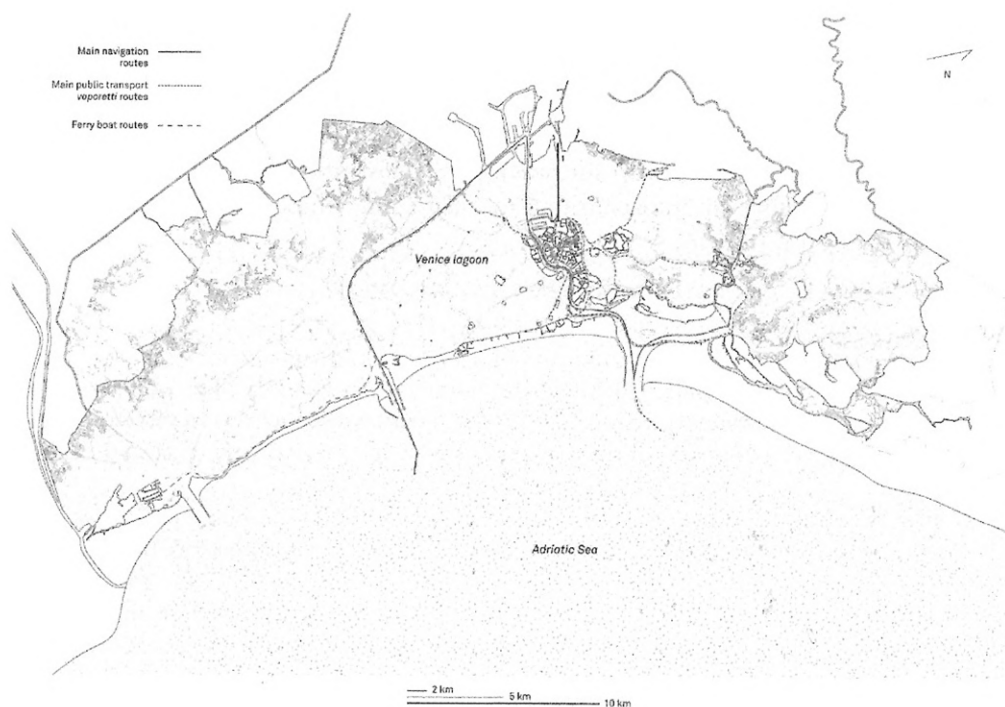


Figure 6 Map of the main navigation and aquatic public transport routes in the Venice lagoon
Source: Map produced by the author

Furthermore, it is significant that the mortgage contracted by the Municipality of Venice with the European Investment Bank to build the tramway that physically and symbolically connects the mainland to Piazzale Roma also weighs heavily on this crisis.³ It seems inevitable that scaling back public transport will consequently reduce the opportunities available to citizens and the regularity of movement within the Venetian metropolitan area. The distances – not physical, of course, but perceived – between the inhabited centres of the lagoon and the hinterlands, between the historic city and the smaller islands, will only increase. The larger territories, such as Burano, Mazzorbo or the Cavallino peninsula, are already considered to form a part of the *aree interne* (internal area) of the country (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2012). It is no coincidence, therefore, that Davide Tagliapietra, a biologist at the National Research Council Institute of Marine Science and inhabitant of Mazzorbo, recently equated Venice and Mestre with valley cities, suggesting

³ Trevisan (2020). For the discussion over the connection between Venice and the mainland see Benevolo (1996), Cervellati (1997), Benevolo et al. (1997).

that the islands of the Venetian lagoon should be thought of as small, high-altitude villages in order to keep them alive.⁴

If Tagliapietra's comparison is appropriate, the COVID-19 emergency and its long-term consequences will continue to push the peripheral islands and hinterland towns of Venice even further up the mountain. New adaptation strategies at high altitudes will therefore be indispensable to ensure that these communities are not starved of oxygen completely.

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4 Online conference held at Università IUAV di Venezia on 16 April 2020.