



Venice in Environmental Peril? Myth and Reality

Dominic Standish

University Press of America, 2011

Paperback £22.95

306 pp

978-0761856641

Reviewed by Federica Palomba

VENICE IS GENERALLY THOUGHT OF as a city in environmental peril because of its sinking buildings, rising sea levels and the negative impact of tourism. Academic and Venice resident Dominic Standish examines these threats and wonders whether they are myths or reality.

The relationship between the Venetian Lagoon and its inhabitants is traced chronologically from the most ancient myths, through history, to the current reality. In myth the lagoon represents human dominion and control over nature. In past reality the sea was guarantor of liberty and safety, preventing invasions. At the height of Venice's power, the Venetians built palaces with open arcades instead of fortresses because the lagoon provided a natural defensive strength. But more recently, and in particular following the 1966 flood, the idea has gained currency that the sea now has the upper hand through flooding, high tides and rising overall sea levels.

The safeguarding of Venice became an international concern and in 1971 the Venice mobile barriers project (MOSE: an acronym for MOdulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico, that is, Electromechanical Experimental Model) was proposed. MOSE was designed to protect the three inlets to the lagoon. Forty years later it has still not been finished, because the project has been continually held up by political conflicts and competing claims.

The author establishes a link between myth and reality: human dominion over nature arises again in reality in the context of policies promoting dams. MOSE means that man can control nature, while environmentalists criticize the barriers as emblematic of human arrogance because of their environmental and aesthetic impact on the landscape. Both critics and proponents of the dam project have admitted that a permanent barrier between the lagoon and the sea might be necessary, but there are still no real alternatives to mobile dams.

These two opposing schools of thought have always clashed in the history of Venice: conservationism, now

represented by environmentalism, and modernization. Napoleon's conquest of the Venetian Republic in 1797 marked the fall of the Venetian Republic and the decline of the sea's defensive role. He brought physical changes to the city's environment, including the destruction of numerous ecclesiastical buildings. The reaction of opinion against this demolition gave birth to conservationism, according to which buildings should be conserved and restored rather than replaced or modernised.

Modern development continued under the Austro-Hungarian Empire and also after Venice became part of Italy in 1866. New port facilities made Venice an important site for international trade: the Stazione Marittima, opened in 1880 and expanded in 1904, linked the lagoon directly with Egypt, India, China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

The conflict between conservationists and modernizers intensified in 1902 after the collapse of the bell tower on St. Mark's Square. Conservationists argued that it should be rebuilt exactly as it was previously, following the principle *com'era, dov'era* ("as it was, where it was"), while modernizers saw an opportunity for improvement. The replacement of the bell tower "as it was, where it was" represented the triumph of conservation over transformation preventing any kind of innovation of buildings, albeit that they were never reconstructed precisely.

Conservationist aims have nowadays resulted in environmentalism, a movement that influences our world-view inasmuch as it has been able to hold up a big project like MOSE.

Standish demonstrates two paradoxes about Venice: the sea as threat when it is a source of wealth and attraction, and tourism that overwhelms Venice while benefiting its economy at the same time.

His analysis concludes with a ten-point proposal to develop Venice, including such proposals as modernizing accommodation, restoring buildings and monuments, and improving transportation to reduce boat traffic. Furthermore after the approval of scientists and engineers, barriers should be installed and the MOSE project completed.

Venice's problems are defined by Standish as social in nature rather than technical or environmental: in response to the initial question, "Venice in peril" from sinking, rising sea levels or tourism is probably more of a myth than reality. "The real danger for Venice... is the sinking of human ambition, courage and resilience... Reviving ambition and resilience in combination with development are the pre-conditions for improving Venice" (pp. 271-2) *