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The 'Public' and the 'Private' in Sixteenth-Century Venice: From Medieval Economy to Early Modern State

Claire Judde de Larivière*

Abstract: »Das 'Öffentliche' und das 'Private' im Venedig des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts: Von der mittelalterlichen Ökonomie zum frühmodernen Staat«. This article analyses the Venetian public galleys' expeditions during the sixteenth century, as a case study for understanding the relationships between patricians and the State, and the way in which the 'public' and the 'private' roles were reorganized in the late Middle Ages. Going further the explanations usually given, the article tries to explain the decline of the public galleys, and emphasizes the symbolic, cultural, political and ideological factors that had also led to the abandonment of public navigation. It seeks to reintegrate economic considerations, practices, actions and actors into their social, political and ideological contexts, and thus avoids isolating economic phenomena and economic thinking from their political background. Doing so, it argues that the abandonment of public navigation in Venice was the corollary of the gradual differentiation between the State and the ruling class that was typical of the earliest stages of modernity.

Keywords: Venice, navigation, trade, moral economy, economics of convention, public/private, early modern State.

1. Introduction

Public galleys and their prestigious cargo symbolised the Venetian economy of the late Middle Ages and were integral to the economic prosperity of the Serenissima (Lane 1933; Lane 1934; Doumerc 1991; Stöckly 1995; Judde de Larivière 2008). Despite their success for almost two centuries, their activity actually began to decline from the beginning of the sixteenth century, and 1569 marked the end of this system which had characterised medieval Venetian trade.

The abandonment of the public galleys' expeditions has generally been seen as marking the end of the Venetian State's direct involvement in trade and as one of the first symptoms of the economic decline of the Serenissima. It has

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been analysed in the context of the European expansion of the sixteenth century which diminished the Mediterranean as well as the Venetian centrality in trade, and in relation to the Ottoman progression in the Mediterranean and the rise of new economic powers (Luzzatto 1954; Lanaro 2006). I would like to go further than these traditional explanations, emphasizing the symbolic, cultural, political and ideological factors that had also led to the abandonment of public navigation.

In this article, I will argue that in addition to this context of economic difficulty and changes in the international balance of trade, other essential transformations must be taken into consideration in order to understand the progressive abandonment of the system. Economic organisation and how it changes over time cannot be understood merely by examining the immediate interests of economic actors. The organisation and infrastructure of the economy are embedded in moral conceptions, ideological agendas and political representations, which explain in part their success or failure (Polanyi 1944; Granovetter 1985). This article seeks to reintegrate economic considerations, practices, actions and actors into their social, political and ideological contexts, and thus avoids isolating economic phenomena and economic thinking from their political background. In a sense, we could argue that the concept of the “moral economy of the poor” defined by Edward P. Thompson as “a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community” could be transferred to other domains of the political economy (Thompson 1975, 79; Fassin 2009). Why not consider a moral economy of the rich, the implications of which are obviously different from those defined by Thompson, but with similar principles of analysis.

Therefore, I will focus on public galleys, particularly highlighting the way in which trade was organised by the State and private investors, and the terms and conditions of economic practices. I will consider the public navigation in its economic dimension, as well as in its political and symbolic one. Trust, collective responsibility, honour and reputation were all factors that came into play in the management of the galleys, together with profit and economic performance. So here I will stress the importance of the relationship between the State and the patricians, and on the specific definitions of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ that arose from this specific relationship. As we will see, public navigation was a system perfectly matching the assimilation that existed in medieval Venice between the State and the patricians, the public and the private, and politics and economics.

And yet in the sixteenth century, political structures and representations were changing. The definition of public good and of the State were adjusted throughout the century, particularly due to a parallel transformation in the definition of the patriciate. The history of public navigation and more broadly of the Venetian economy, were determined by the early modern transformation of the public and private spheres. The differentiation between the ruling class

and the State apparatus led to a new definition of public institutions and public authority. I will argue here that the abandonment of public navigation in Venice, beyond the economic and political contexts, was a corollary of this gradual differentiation between the State and the ruling class that was typical of the earliest stages of modernity. In sixteenth-century Venice, the change in economic practices was one of the signs of the emergence of a new state configuration. The economic organisation of public galleys offers therefore an ideal case study to illuminate the transformation of the State at the beginning of the early modern period.

This article will first consider public navigation showing the ways in which it was typical of the medieval Venetian definition of the State and public authority, and the important public implications of this economic organisation. The Mediterranean economic and political conditions that brought about the process of decline will then be analysed, before focusing on the transformation of the balance between private interests and public good, from an economic as well as a political point of view. I will finally argue that abandoning the medieval system of public galleys was one of the consequences, as well as one of the manifestations, of the emergence of a new form of statehood in Venice.

2. The State, the Patriciate and the Public Economy

The genesis of the medieval Venetian economic infrastructure is inseparable from the genesis of the State and of the Venetian ruling group (Luzzatto 1961; Gonzalez de Lara 2008). Between the late thirteenth century and the first half of the next century, a group of powerful families managed to impose themselves at the head of the main institutions, basing their legitimacy on belonging to the Great Council. The long process of the Serrata between 1280 and 1320 allowed the definition of a privileged group of noblemen – the patricians – to allocate for themselves the monopoly of political power (Rösch 2000).¹

Most of them owed their position to their economic influence and power. In the fourteenth century, the vast majority of wealthy patricians were merchants and investors in international trade or in the craft industry. As patricians were considered to be merchants, and as merchants' business was seen as the foundation of the common good, patricians claimed that they could at the same time defend both their private interests and the interest of the community. Throughout the sixteenth century, the political image of patricians being originally merchants continued to be used regularly in the rhetoric employed by the ruling group (De Vivo 2007, 87-8).

¹ As was usually the case in Venetian documents, I use the terms patrician and noble synonymously.

Of course, dominant groups identifying their specific interests with the common good was a standard political feature of discourse in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Yet in Venice, it was the patriciate, not the king or the emperor, who embodied sovereignty. The functions of the prince were performed by the doge, but authority was held above all by the patrician group who considered its own interests as one with the community's interests. Power was owned and exercised by collective institutions such as the Great Council, the Signoria or the Collegio. Because every patrician was a member of the Great Council, and by consequence could be elected to the different assemblies, the patriciate as a whole constituted the State.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this theoretical model of a patriciate embodying the State was also possible because of the relative equivalence between the number of patricians and the number of public offices (Zannini 1996; Cozzi 1973, 208). Patricians were elected for short periods of time, generally no more than two years, and a rapid rotation of offices was agreed. This was intended to prevent the 'professionalization' of political staff, but also guaranteed the circulation of power within the patriciate. In practice, a majority of patricians participated in the exercise of public authority which reinforced this model of the convergence between public and private interests and the idea of equivalence between the State and the patriciate.

As a matter of fact, the State was the patriciate because, apart from a few exceptions, the majority of the members of the Great Council were regularly elected to government or administrative offices and were involved in State management. Furthermore, at least until the fifteenth century, the same patricians were in charge of public institutions and of the management of the major economic structures. The same individuals made the rules that organised economic structures and then operated them as well. They represented the ambiguity which was the basis of economic action in Venice. Patricians, economic actors as well as trustees of public authority, were conscious of the blending between their public and private functions, and this constituted one of the legitimations of their power.

As a consequence, the 'public' was not defined in and of itself, but emerged from patricians' actions in 'public' situations (Goodman 1992). Since the patriciate was the State, the same patricians embodied public or private interests depending on the timing and intent of their action (Mackenney 1998). It was the situation and the purpose of their activity which characterised the nature of their actions, more than their personal identity or their functions. In 1525, a Senate deliberation recalled that a patrician who refused a mission abroad ("*ambassaria, provedaria o altra*") damaged his own interest as well as the public one ("*l'utile si suo come pubblico*")². Patricians were conscious of this

² Sanudo, Marin. *I Diarii*. Rinaldo Fulin et al. eds. Bologna (1989). vol. 38, col. 70, 9 March 1525.

convergence as the report made by the ambassador Giovanni Michiel, coming back from England in 1557, shows. Speaking about a present offered by the King, he said he could not accept it, “neither as a private person, neither as a public person”.³

Consequently, we cannot consider the State and the patriciate as two separate entities; the two institutions have to be considered as having a dialectical relationship. Public authority and its expression was the result of the peculiar relationship between public institutions, the government, and the ruling elite. As a consequence, it would not be accurate to separate the public and the private dimension of patricians’ economic and political actions. The same patrician would defend the common good when he was in a situation acting as a political official, but would protect his own private interests in business situations. Private and public spheres, from a political as well as an economic point of view, were not separated inherently, but depended on the situation.

From this point of view, the public navigation of galleys, created at the beginning of the fourteenth century, constituted an organisation perfectly adapted to the blending of the public and private functions and roles of the Venetian patricians. Indeed, the system was based precisely on this combination of private and public interests. Convoys of public galleys were instituted in order to redeem the costs of building the fleet. The idea was to use the largest galleys during peace time for commercial trips, which would navigate in annual convoys – the *mude* (as in other places in Italy: Mallett 1967; Kirk 2005). A legal and institutional framework was quickly established, creating norms and rules that controlled trade and protected ships and merchants. Galleys were safe ships because they sailed in convoys and because of the two hundred oarsmen who were free men rather than slaves, who had to help defend the ship in case of attack. Being particularly safe, but of limited capacity, they only transported profitable and luxury goods.

The convoys were closely related to another public infrastructure, the renowned Arsenale, created at the beginning of the twelfth century. It was one of the first Venetian ‘public firms’, and played an important part in the dynamism of commercial structures (Lane 1934; Bellavitis 1983; Concina 1984; Davis 1991; Caniato 1996). Financed by the State, the shipyard employed many workers who were in charge of the building and maintenance of the communal fleet. This is where the galleys were built.

The specificity of the convoys was their associated public and private management and their public and private actors. The State rented the vessels to private investors who joined together in temporary companies for the occasion.⁴ In order to guarantee the public nature of the enterprise, auctions (*incanto*) were organised. Only patricians were allowed to take part in these auctions,

³ Albèri 1839, ser. I, vol. II, 379, “*nè come persona privata, nè come persona pubblica*”.

⁴ Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), Avogaria di Comun, reg. 179, Prove di età.

so becoming the galley's *patrono* (the ship captain) meant they had the monopoly on the management of the galleys and, consequently, on the trade in the most precious merchandise. Citizens could not participate in auction, but could, however, invest in the capital in association with the patricians (Grubb 2000).

A tacit and unanimous agreement claimed that every patrician in Venice had the chance to take advantage of maritime trade income. Public discourses regularly repeated how it was wise to guarantee egalitarianism among patricians (Romano 2009). Concerning the prices of merchandise, for example, the Senate claimed that it was “advisable to use equality for everyone.”⁵ In 1527, the Collegio declared that a “just Republic cannot tolerate that one is advantaged compared with another, and that everybody must be equal as is honest and fair.”⁶

This agreement rested on a set of conventions which linked together rulers, *patroni* of galleys, sailors, oarsmen, merchants and investors. I will consider here a convention as “a system of mutual expectations about competences and behaviours, which are designed to be self-evident and for the purpose of being self-evident” (Salais 1989, 213; Diaz-Bone Salais 2011). In a way, this definition recalls the “institution” as defined by Avner Greif, “a system of social factors that conjointly generate a regularity of behavior (...) a system of rules, beliefs, norms, and organizations that together generate a regularity of (social behavior)” (Greif 2006, 30). The conventions at the root of public navigation were built on a compromise, a tacit agreement between the patricians on the one hand – economic actors as well as trustees of public authority – and between the patricians and their partners on the other. These conventions were based on trust and were facilitated by the general conception of the balance between public good and private interests (on the subject of trust see Muldrew 1998; Fontaine 2008). They precisely aligned with the great Venetian narrative that connected the fate of the merchants and that of the *Serenissima*; a model still valid – at least rhetorically – in the sixteenth century. “Everybody knows that the fact that merchandise is brought to this city by galleys is important for the public good as well as the private,”⁷ claimed the Senators in 1500.

In fact, the public navigation was organised in such a way that it clearly satisfied at the same time private interests and public good, which were embodied by the same persons: patricians. At the end of the trip, the State and the investors split the profits in half, and the individual investors were paid in proportion to their investment (Tucci 1981a). The system was therefore based on a clear distribution of expenditure and profits between the State and private investors. The former was in charge of the more demanding investment of shipbuilding

⁵ ASV, *Senato, Mar*, reg. 15, fol. 2v-3, 20 March 1500.

⁶ ASV, *Collegio, Notatorio*, reg. 20, fol. 129, 22 August 1527.

⁷ ASV, *Senato, Mar*, reg. 15, fol. 44v, 5 November 1500.

and maintenance, leaving the patrician merchants to focus on the voyage, financing equipment, salaries and arranging for cargo.

The patricians involved in the organisation received considerable benefits from the system. In addition to their commercial profits, they obtained an important subsidy and enjoyed the advantage of efficient public institutions, including an official network around the Mediterranean and in Europe (Ashtor 1983; Arbel 1996; Dursteler 2007; O'Connell 2009; Christ 2012). Officials were in charge of defending Venetian merchants, whether they were travelling or living in foreign cities. The good reputation of Venetian trade as well as the general public policy of support resulted in high profits for the merchants and businessmen of the Republic.

By virtue of the specificity of this organization, and the balance between public and private interests, galleys had to fulfil important public missions which were essential in defining their activity (Judde de Larivière 2002). First of all, they had military functions. They were originally warships and could be requisitioned at any time. In case of danger or in wartime, they had to join the fleet (*Armada*) in order to defend Venetian interests (Lane 1957). Secondly, public galleys also played an important role in the fiscal structure of the Venetian State and they generated flows of merchandise and customs duties. Their success was consequently a source of public income. Finally, the regularity of the convoys as well as their efficiency guaranteed the reputation and honour of Venice around the Mediterranean and in Europe, which benefitted Venetian merchants as well as the State.

Both private and public actors benefited and that is essential to understanding the success of the organisation as well as its longevity. In fact, the *mude* were not, in terms of volume and value, the largest Venetian commercial infrastructure. Private ships were much more numerous, and the total amount of their cargoes could be ten times more than the galleys' cargoes (Lane 1934, 240). Venetian merchants had at their disposal these two types of efficient commercial organisation, both public galleys and private round ships, which coexisted and collaborated fruitfully (Hocquet 1991; Judde de Larivière 2005). Nevertheless, public galleys embodied the fortune of Venice as no other system did because of the political and ideological dimension of that organisation.

Public navigation therefore combined real economic and symbolic benefits. From an economic point of view, convoys presented many advantages: safety, regularity, reputation, and profitability. But from a symbolic perspective, the system also perfectly matched the ideological, political and social frameworks of medieval Venice, the conception of honour and reputation. Beyond the role convoys played in commercial traffic, they were a way for patricians to express and display their public functions in the economic field, to defend the honour of the State and themselves. The system was one of the resources that enabled the perpetuation of patrician authority and aided the ruling group to maintain its power.

The functioning of public navigation can only be understood in this articulation between the economic rationality of the actors and their pursuit of profit on the one hand, and that of their public and political actions on the other. The public navigation involved a system of exchange as well as norms and obligations. In this sense, we can speak about a “moral economy”, a system embedded in a set of political and ideological considerations that were essential to understanding its success. This explains why the public galleys remained a dynamic organisation until the end of the fifteenth century.

3. Sixteenth-Century Transformations

From the sixteenth century, a general process of decline affected Venetian public navigation. This decline was gradual and continuous (Doumerc Stöckly 1995; Doumerc Judde de Larivière 1998; Judde de Larivière 2008). In the second half of the fifteenth century, around 12 to 14 galleys navigated every year. From 1510, there were only four or five each year, and after 1540, fewer than three galleys a year. The last convoy organised in a traditional way sailed in 1569. Considering the complexity and importance of this system in the Venetian economy, multiple levels of explanation need to be sought for this decline, looking at the economic and political contexts as well as social actors’ perceptions and reactions.

First of all, political and economic circumstances, both Venetian and international, partly explain the general decrease of public navigation. Sixteenth-century political events created an uncertain context for commercial navigation and trade. Diplomatic tensions and wars resulted in unsafe international circumstances as, for example, the Ottoman advance in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Italian wars, and the Spanish threat in North Africa. Public navigation suffered particularly from this fragile political context, resulting in the cancellation of several convoys throughout the sixteenth century (Lane 1973). The Venetian economy was affected by these operations and for many years the budget of the city was largely dictated by the exigencies of war. The ruling elite had to focus on military and political issues, and economic matters were relatively neglected. This shift is clear when reading the Senate or the Great Council deliberations. From the 1540s, the majority of debates, particularly in the Senate series *da mar* (dealing with sea-based issues), were focused on the military fleet, its maintenance and its operations, and no longer on commercial navigation.⁸

Intensification of the activity of pirates and privateers also worsened the circumstances for public galleys (Tenenti 1960). Moreover, new European com-

⁸ ASV, *Senato, Mar*, reg. 39 to 41.

petitors were challenging Venetian hegemony. With the shifting of the centre of trade from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic coasts, Venice was losing its centrality. The Portuguese were among the most serious competitors in the spice market (Teixeira Marques de Oliveira 2000). At the same time, the French and Spanish kingdoms, and Italian and Dalmatian cities were also reinforcing their position in the European market (Mallett 1967; Malanima 1985; Kirk 2005). Jewish merchants also became serious competitors for the Venetians (Arbel 1995, 2001).

The international economic and political circumstances were clearly not favourable for Venetian maritime trade. The consequences on public convoys were evident. Nevertheless, it was not the first time public galleys had had to face problems and unfortunate circumstances. Consequently, we need to focus on the way rulers and investors adapted their practices and discourses to these circumstances. Their actions reflected political choices and specific cultural conceptions. The answers given depended on their political and economic choices, on their moral and cultural views as much as on the economic situation.

4. Private Interests vs. Public Good

From an economic point of view, the individuals involved in trade and the management of the galleys, confronted with the fragile economic and political context, had to make choices to adapt to the new context. Patricians considered new management methods, in which a new conception of public organisation was clearly emerging. Many small and apparently unimportant modifications were made to the running of the *mude*. Threatened and weakened, the Venetian rulers had to apply a pragmatic policy in order to adapt navigation to current circumstances. Itineraries, ports of call, deadlines, and the volume and nature of the merchandise were constantly altered. The frequency and the intensity of these changes eventually transformed the principles of commercial navigation in profound ways. The regularity of convoys was no longer guaranteed, and thus the whole system was at risk. The commercial reputation of Venetian merchants was weakened and their businesses were experiencing difficulty.

In addition, after 1500, the number of investors in public navigation constantly declined, with a corresponding increase in the size of their investment. From the 1520s, companies were generally composed of no more than two investors. A transition had occurred: large companies made up of many investors were replaced by small ones with a limited number of investors who were sharing the available capital. Consequently, there were fewer patricians and *cittadini* involved in the system. From 1495 to 1500, there were more than 250 of them but half a century later, there were no more than thirty, and all of them were members of a few family-based networks.

Some investors established the so called “*maone*”, commercial association considered illegal by the Senate. The *maona* was an effective means for imposing power and authority, for example by directing all convoys in one year and by removing other potential investors. *Maone* and cartels were in opposition to Venetian principles, which claimed that political balance was established on the equality of patricians. In 1505, Antonio Tron, *savio del consiglio*, tried to ban them in order to respect the “*bene universal*.”⁹

This restriction of the number of patricians involved confirms the general oligarchical tendency identified by scholars for the sixteenth century in Venice (Finlay 1980; De Vivo 2007, 28 sq.). At least during the first half of the sixteenth century and before the sector became obsolete in the 1550s, some of the most influential patricians monopolized the profits to be made. In this new configuration, public galleys lost their traditional collective dimension. Corporate governance was no longer a reality.

Another key aspect is that investors appeared ready to multiply the ways to circumvent the law in order to increase their profits. Public navigation was organised by a set of laws and conventions (Zordan 1991). Actors obeyed different norms and respected tacit agreements defined by a common trust. But throughout the sixteenth century, every moment of the trip gave rise to illegal tactics, from the auctions to the constitution of the company and throughout the trip itself. Patroni and investors would not hesitate to alter their itineraries, or the duration of their stay in ports of call, when they thought they could increase their profits by doing so (Jude de Larivière 2008, chap. 4). The overloading of galleys, an ancient scam, was never resolved by the rulers neither was the smuggling, which consisted of merchants and managers trying to trade merchandise without paying taxes and customs duties (Lane 1962).¹⁰

Certainly, none of these tricks were invented in the sixteenth century. They were overused stratagems, perfected year after year, in order to escape State control and increase profits. Nevertheless, these practices took on a different meaning in a context of decline, in which the number of investors was falling. These illicit practices were making an already difficult situation worse. Investors and *patroni* no longer followed some of the tacit shared assumptions, i.e. the conventions that had supported public navigation for more than two centuries.

On several occasions, it would appear that investors opposed the captain of the convoy, the patrician public officer responsible for enforcing the law and imposing the terms of the *incanto* during the navigation, although he represented the State, the common good, and the Venetian community as a whole. During the sixteenth century, many captains complained of the lack of respect

⁹ ASV, *Senato, Mar*, reg. 16, fol. 60, 25 February 1505.

¹⁰ See, for example, ASV, *Senato, Mar*, reg. 15, fol. 160-160v, 2 January 1503; *Collegio, Notatorio*, reg. 20, fol. 39v, 22 April 1525 ; fol. 129-130, 22 August 1527.

merchants and investors showed them. In their *relazione*, the reports they had to pronounce in front of the Senate after their return to Venice, several of them criticized the unfairness of the *incanto* or expressed the feeling that the law they had to follow no longer made sense.¹¹ In January 1533, for example, the captain and the *patroni* of the convoy of Flanders were opposed¹². The Senators decided to intervene in order to restore the “justice and honour of our state.”¹³ The Avogaria di Comun led the investigation, in particular against one of the *patroni*, Maffeo Bernardo, who was accused of trying to escape paying tax causing “the dishonour of our state and harm no less great for travel and *cose nostre*”.

The refusal of the public navigation actors to fulfil their public missions as well as their military obligation was clear. The attitude of economic actors regarding their military commitment changed in parallel with the transformation of the fleet. Patricians who invested in public navigation knew that they would have to join the Armada on some occasions, but the subsidy they received was regarded as compensation for that risk. Yet, investors showed themselves increasingly reluctant to fulfil military commitments.

In 1499, after the battle of Zonchio against the Ottomans, the behaviour of the *patroni* of the public galleys provoked a scandal, and their cowardice was denounced (Zille 1945; Lane 1973). They were accused of having shown little enthusiasm for fighting, not having seen their military mission as a priority, and thus, favouring their business interests. According to Girolamo Priuli, who used a typical rhetoric, “Venetian citizens preferred their life than honour and glory,”¹⁴ when they were expected to prefer “the *patria* more than themselves.”¹⁵ The *patroni* and the captain were imprisoned and brought to justice¹⁶. These accusations and denunciations revealed a new tension between the actors of the public navigation and the State. The reluctance of merchant galleys *patroni* to have to join the Armada in the successive years confirms this trend¹⁷.

Like the majority of European states at this time, Venice was establishing a specialised and professionalised armed fleet (Guilmartin 1974, 194sq., 253sq.; Glete 1993; Sicking 2004, 458 sq.). The defence of the lagoon and the Adriatic required safer and more efficient infrastructure. Technically, progress in gunpowder, canons, arms, and soldiers’ equipment justified the existence of a

¹¹ ASV, *Collegio, Relazioni*, busta 61, fol. 27, 22 May 1525.

¹² ASV, *Senato, Mar*, reg. 22, fol. 161v -162, 23 January 1533.

¹³ ASV, *Senato, Mar*, reg. 22, fol. 162v , 27 January 1533 ; fol. 163v , 31 January 1533.

¹⁴ Priuli, Girolamo. *I Diarii*. A. Segre and R. Cessi eds. *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*. t. XXIV, vol. 1, p. 281, March 1500.

¹⁵ ASV, *Senato, Terra*, reg. 14, fol. 29v , 13 June 1501.

¹⁶ Sanudo, Marin. *I Diarii*, vol. 2, col. 1296, 1329, September 1499, vol. 3, col. 66-67, 16 December 1499. Priuli, Girolamo. *I Diarii*, vol. 1, p. 223-224, November 1499. See also ASV, *Avogaria di Comun, Raspe*, b. 3659, fol. 16v , 25 septembre 1500.

¹⁷ See, for example, ASV, *Senato, Mar*, reg. 15, fol. 150v -51, 11 January 1501.

specialised fleet. Public galleys, both commercially and militarily, seemed obsolete – they were losing their relevancy. The mixture of commercial and military functions no longer corresponded with new military policies in Europe. This clearer distinction between a military fleet and a commercial one fed the unwillingness of patricians to fulfil military functions while at the same time managing merchant galleys, leading to the end of the requisition of galleys during the sixteenth century. As a consequence, during the war against the Ottomans from 1537-1540, public commercial navigation had to be suspended instead of requisitioning the *mude*.

To summarize this complex transformation, we saw that on the one hand, there were fewer and fewer patricians able to take advantage of the system; and, on the other hand, those patricians did no longer fulfil their public responsibilities and commitments, for example they did not want to serve in the Armada, tried to avoid paying duties, and did not satisfy merchants' demands. They could not be trusted anymore. In these conditions, the traditional spice trade monopoly of the public galleys could no longer be justified. Until this time, this monopoly had been considered as compensation for patricians who collaborated with the State and depended on certain conditions; participation in military operations, transparent management, regular payment of taxes, duties and salaries, and respect of the principle of equality and equal access to the system for all patricians. When these principles were rejected in the sixteenth century, it seemed that actors were betraying the tacit convention that had allowed the system to persist until this time.

In the new economic context characterised by competition, public navigation did not seem well-adapted or efficient. The regularity and the monopoly of the medieval convoys had vanished. Public navigation had become an overly complicated and restrictive system, too difficult to control. The costs of protection and of surveillance were too high in comparison with the profits and no longer justified the continuance of public navigation. As for the investors themselves, the system was no longer financially attractive. The *incanto* rules were too restrictive when held up against the few advantages that the system now offered. These rules previously had been justified by the monopoly that galleys enjoyed, but in the sixteenth century they no longer made sense in the context of strong competition from foreign merchants as well as from private Venetian navigation.

The theoretical discourse that had sustained the activity during the Middle Ages, based on a conception of equality and homogeneity within the patriciate, no longer matched the reality. The balance and consensus at the base of official discourse and political rhetoric – the idea of the perfect overlapping of public and private interests – were not anymore a possible ideal. For decades, public navigation had represented the paradigm of the Venetian economy, the model of a State-regulated economy which allows private interests and public good to converge. Yet in the sixteenth century, the principles of the public navigation

system were hotly debated by the actors involved, who denounced its numerous inconsistencies. The *mude* no longer seemed suited to the new political conception of economy and public action.

5. State and Patriciate in Sixteenth-Century Venice: A New Relationship

If we now take into account the political context in which these various transformations took place, we understand better what happened to the public/private balance. As a long and rich historiography devoted to society and politics in sixteenth-century Venice has outlined, demographic and political characteristic of the noble group transformed at this time (Finlay 1980; Chojnacki 1994; Chojnacki 2000). The population of Venice increased regularly throughout the century and reached its peak in the 1570s, with a population estimated at 170,000 inhabitants (Beltrami 1954, 57; Todesco 1989, 134). The noble group roughly followed this tendency, with a large increase during the first three decades of the century. The enlargement of the patrician group had profound consequences, particularly from a political point of view, because the general balance between available political offices and the number of patricians was disappearing. At the end of the fifteenth century, there were 765 offices available, while the members of the Great Council already numbered between 2000 and 2400 (Zannini 1996, 438, 461-2 for the list of offices). In 1520, the members of the Senate declared:

The number of *zentilhomeni* having grown considerably, it is necessary for the sake of justice and equality to do whatever necessary so that all may participate in political offices or *rezimenti*, as has always been the intention of our State, as can be clearly seen in its laws.¹⁸

All the patricians could not serve the State, and competition escalated within the group with the more influential patricians seeking to obtain the more powerful and prestigious offices (Finlay 1980, 74 sq.). Many other patricians who were suffering from relative poverty merely sought paid offices rather than prestigious ones. The question of poor patricians became a crucial political issue during the first half of the century (Pullan 1971, 229-30; Cozzi 1973, 208; Cowan 1982). The noble group had always contained a margin of poor patricians, but economic and political difficulties were exacerbating the problem. The conception of poverty lost the respectable and sacred dimension it had held during the Middle Ages, linked with a Christian notion of charity. Poor nobles were no longer considered as part of the patriciate group, and the inability to pay taxes represented a reason for exclusion from the Great Council. The Ve-

¹⁸ ASV, *Senato, Terra*, reg. 21, fol. 98v, 20 March 1520.

netian chronicler Girolamo Priuli even claimed that three quarters of patricians should have been considered as poor as they were dependent on the salary of their political offices to survive (Finlay 1980, 75).

This process reinforced internal hierarchies within the patriciate. A clearer boundary distinguished different groups depending on the level of wealth, prestige or power. From a political point of view as well as from an economic one, these distinctions strengthened, and the ideal of a unique and unified dominant group no longer corresponded with reality. Egalitarian discourse continued to be employed by some patricians, but it no longer represented reality. Defenders of the public navigation could support the system by claiming it allowed the benefit of all but in fact it did not.

To some extent, the *cittadini* participated in this phenomenon, thanks to the strengthening of their legal recognition throughout the sixteenth century (Zannini 1993; Bellavitis 1995; Grubb 2000). Following decades of demands, *cittadini originari* gained the monopoly on positions in the bureaucracy. The *uffici di ministero*, all administrative offices, were reserved for the *cittadini originari*, now in charge of the administration of the State and public institutions. Of course, the *cittadini* did not take part in political deliberations, and could not vote on laws. But they certainly played a role in state management and now had an official status which gave them new social prestige and honorability. They were part of the State, the *seconda corona*, and were recognised as agents and executors of patrician decisions. There were economic benefits as well, and many *cittadini* became wealthier and more influential economic actors. After decades spent accumulating capital, they were able to impose themselves in markets, and particularly in commercial navigation. In doing so, they managed to take advantage of the galleys' decline and, thanks to their private ships, they gradually conquered the markets that had been lost by public galleys.

Facing the threat from this competitive group, patricians attempted to protect the purity and exclusivity of their status. In 1506, the *libro d'oro* was created – in which noble births had to be registered – and new legislation was created regarding marriage between nobles and non-nobles. Stanley Chojnacki has identified these elements as parts of a 'third serrata,' a third step in the 'closing up' of the frontiers of nobility (Crescenzi 1996; Chojnacki 2000). Yet, this legal definition could not stop the growing internal divisions within the patriciate and the fact that public authority itself was fracturing.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, the State and the patriciate were no longer one and the same, not only because the patriciate was no longer a coherent group, but also because it no longer monopolised political and economic power. All the patricians were not taking part in the government and could not claim their part of public authority. Numerous hierarchies divided the group, and the Venetian State did not emanate from a unique and homogenous community. Different persons, with divergent interests, claimed to represent the

State and public interests. The patrician writer Gasparo Contarini recognised this new situation when he declared that only the most honest and the wisest men were more interested in the public good than in their private interests (Bowd 2000, 88). The definition of public good was not firmly agreed, and, as a consequence, the public and private were being redefined. Economic procedures, and particularly public navigation, were strongly affected by these changes.

6. Conclusion

The abandonment of public navigation, which had symbolised the maritime and commercial domination of Venice in the late Middle Ages, signified a turning point in the economic development of the city. Commercial navigation had irrevocably altered, as the functions of private individuals and of the State were transformed throughout the sixteenth century. In fact, the private maritime sector actually improved at the same time, leaving more space for non-patrician investors and for a system which was easier to manage in the new economic and political international context (Tucci 1981b; Tucci 1987).

A combination of exogenous and endogenous factors drove the transformation, with the economic process embedded in the more complex phenomenon of the transformation of the Venetian State. Public navigation had constituted an economic organisation adapted to the political and ideological framework of the late Middle Ages. It perfectly illustrated the convergence between public good and private interests, the overlapping between the interests of the State and those of private investors. Yet, the political changes of the sixteenth century and the redefinition of the private and public upset medieval traditions. There was no longer one coherent patriciate that could at the same time claim to be the defender of the public good and of their private interests, and the ideal of an egalitarian group had disappeared. The medieval Venetian economy has been based on the fact that there was a convergence between the economic and political functions of patricians, and that public and private interests were not distinct. This model could no longer be defended in the sixteenth-century circumstances and, as such, public navigation could no longer be justified.

What defined, until the sixteenth century, Venetian patricians' power, as well as that of other rulers in the Middle Ages, was the blending between political and economic functions as well as between the 'public' and the 'private'. The public galleys were a typical expression of this phenomenon. Their abandonment was a corollary of the gradual distinction between these functions. This dissociation between politics and economics as well as between public and private spheres can be considered one characteristic of 'modernity.' The model of the state should be considered more as paradigm than as reality, an ideal helping us to conceptualise the gradual transition from 'medieval' politi-

cal practice towards a 'modern' State. However, the transformations of commercial navigation in sixteenth-century Venice clearly reflect one aspect of this process of dissociation between political power and economic power, between public and private spheres, typical of new forms of government in sixteenth-century Europe.

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