

Image of the other as a tool of political legitimation: image of Venice in Renaissance Ragusa

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My goal in this paper is to illustrate a relatively simple point in a hopefully entertaining manner. I intend to show how, in the sixteenth century, image of the Other could have been used in order to gain very concrete political profit. Of course, I am far from denying that images of the Other frequently were more or less “spontaneously” created cultural facts without any obvious instrumental value. Yet there were also instances in which they were consciously modified and even fully fabricated in order to serve the interests of those in power.

I will try to illustrate this point by using examples from one very complex, centuries-long relationship between the two Early-modern republics: Venice and Ragusa. Now, I am not so local patriotic as to assume that all of you are familiar with the history of Ragusa, especially concerning its relationship with the Most Serene Republic. Therefore a short introduction should follow.

Despite the endless diplomatic phrases about ancient friendship and love between the two city-states, the relationship between Renaissance Ragusa and Venice was one of profound and constant tensions. Ragusa was the only Dalmatian city which in the 16th century was not under the Venetian dominion - albeit Venice did rule it in the past - but was an independent aristocratic republic. Making things even more complicated, in the 15th and 16th centuries this ex- colony of Venice became a fierce economic competitor of the Most Serene Republic in the Mediterranean. Actually, the only thing which kept Venice from the direct military attack on Ragusa and its annexation to the rest of Dalmatia was its status as a tributary of the Ottoman empire and its strong connections on the Spanish and Papal Courts. Albeit the open military conflict never happened, Venetian galleys were systematically harassing Ragusan merchant ships, and the two republics waged endless diplomatic battles in the Western courts, especially concerning the usual Venetian accusations – frequently correct – of Ragusans helping the Ottoman Empire.

The question I wish to answer is: how was this powerful neighbor, competitor and even ex-ruler represented in the Ragusan political culture? Even more importantly, how were those images of Venice, constructed in Ragusa, used to gain political profit?

My point of departure is the fact that Venice was both glorified and demonized, depending on the needs of the moment. Exactly this ambivalence or even contradictoriness of its image reveals its instrumental, utilitarian nature.

The most frequent image of Venice in Ragusan political culture was what I would call “predatory”. In Ragusan historiography, literature and diplomacy Venetians were represented as *capitali inimici* (greatest enemies), as tireless plotters against Ragusan independence (*libertà*) whose cunningness and slyness received such mythic proportions that in city’s historiography *fraus veneta* (Venetian trickery) became proverbial, an almost technical term.

This image of Venice is visible already in one of the most fundamental myths of old Ragusa - the myth about the adoption of its patron-saint, St. Blaise. All Ragusan Renaissance historians tell the same invented tale of a Venetian fleet which supposedly some time in the 10th century came under the walls of Ragusa claiming that it was headed for Levant. The Venetians were received warmly, as friends, and given food and drink. However, the true purpose of the Venetian fleet was to conquer Ragusa by treachery, crossing its walls under the cover of the night. To their surprise, the Ragusan historiographers claim, on the walls of the sleeping city the invading Venetians encountered no less than the celestial army lead by an old bearded man. After several nights of such vain Venetian attempts to take the city by surprise, the old man who lead the celestial army defending Ragusa, appeared in a vision to a pious priest and introduced himself as St. Blaise. He told him about the Venetian treachery, saying that Venetians were only pretending to be friends, that in fact they are capitali inimici, „the greatest enemies” of Ragusa and told him to notify the rulers of the city about the night attacks. After the pious priest told Ragusan patricians about the true state of affairs, they grabbed arms, and, one of the chroniclers with pleasure concludes: „made a great slaughter among the Venetians.”

This invented story was most probably created sometime in the early 15th century, in a period of the renewed Venetian expansion on the Eastern shore of the Adriatic, when one after the other Dalmatian city was falling back under its rule. Its message is clear: Ragusan independence is guaranteed by the God himself, who sent one of his saints to defend Ragusan *libertà* against Venetians, depicted as false friends, as hypocritic betrayers of hospitality. This well-known story, and a mythic event which was commemorated every year with a military procession on the feast day of St. Blaise, gave the basic coordinates for the typical image of Venetians in Renaissance Ragusa. In Ragusan political culture, not the neighboring infidel Turks, but Venice was the true demonized Other, the Enemy. Its alleged desire to destroy Ragusan independence was such that, as one 15th century chronicler reports, Venetians already in the 10th century made a secret law which prescribed that their councils should meet every Wednesday to discuss only one thing: „the destruction of Ragusa”! In their numerous quarrels with Venetian ambassadors, Ragusan diplomats spoke along the same lines. They endlessly tried to persuade the Pope and Spanish king about the „evil intentions” (*mal animo*) of Venice, about its „constant plotting against our freedom,” its „hereditary venom against our Republic.” The image of Venice as the great adversary of Ragusa was a common place also of Ragusan Renaissance literature in which it frequently received satirical overtones. One of the most important sixteenth century Ragusan poets, Mavro Vetranović called Venice - alluding to the Lagoons - „Mud,” and addressed the Venetians as „Mud-dwellers” or „fishermen in the muddy swamp” reproaching them for plotting against Ragusa instead of spending their energies and money on something far more purposeful: fighting the infidel Turks. Examples of similar construction of Venice are endless. I will end with just one, quite unconventional. In one of the manuscripts of Ragusan annals, an anonymous 16th century coppist, after having copied one of the typical anti-Venetian paragraphs, added a very personal, spontaneous note. He finished the anti-Venetian tirade writing: *Diavolo li porti*, «Let the devil take them»!

As any successful ideological construct, this demonised image of Venice had a grain of truth to it. Indeed, Venice was systematically attempting to damage Ragusan trade and at

certain points even did contemplate a military attack on Ragusa. Yet, the Most Serene Republic definitely did not waste as much energies on contemplating the destruction of Ragusa as Ragusans obsessively claimed. The reason for such overstatements, for the almost paranoid construction of Venice in Ragusan political culture is simple: it was useful. In the first place, it was useful to Ragusan patrician government which sponsored or directly created most of such anti-Venetian statements.

On one hand, this image was an effective response to the pressures of Venetian diplomacy. Especially during the Christian leagues against the Turks, Venetian diplomacy attempted to persuade its allies – Pope and Spain – into conquering Ragusa or at least into repressive measures against its trade, claiming that Ragusa was collaborating with the Ottomans, spying for them and even sending them arms and skilled labor force. Ragusan diplomacy responded to these, sometimes justified, accusations by launching the “predatory” image of Venice, claiming that Venetians are telling such “lies”, “falsehoods” in order to achieve their old hidden goal – conquering Ragusa for themselves. What helped the persuasiveness of such claims is the fact that Ragusans actually played on a well known card, the European wide *topos* of immense Venetian ambition and greed for power. Such image of Venice was quite wide-spread in the 16th century and was especially popularised during the League of Cambrais when Venetians were charged with the ambition of no less than to conquer the whole of Europe.

This Ragusan rhetoric seems to have worked quite well. For example, in the Venetian archive I found quite a bewildered letter of the otherwise cool headed, even cynical Venetian council of Ten (*Consiglio dei Dieci*). From this letter, dated with 19th September 1571, it became apparent that Venetian accusations against Ragusa in front of the Pope seriously backfired. Namely, after the Venetian ambassadors read aloud their reports about Ragusans helping the Turks, the Pope Pius V, as the document puts it: “grew choleric, stood up from his chair and started yelling: I have been warned that you Venetians are liars, seeking to take Ragusa for yourselves!”. Finally, the supreme pontiff, “all red in face”, despite their loud protests, chased the Venetians out of the room. Ragusan senate, roughly around this time, enthusiastically sent several ducats to its representative in the Roman curia, suggesting that he buy himself a nice “golden chain for his great services to the patria.”

Besides such function in foreign policies, the demonizing image of Venice had another, perhaps even more important purpose. It served to glorify and legitimize the rule of Ragusan patriciate. The predatory image of Venice, endlessly repeated in front of the city’s population, was the variant of the old trick of creating cohesion and deference by constructing the common enemy. One relatively late source reveals how far this could go: in the mid-18th century French consul in Ragusa reports that “the hatred of Venice” is taught even to the kids in school and that “already in the young age it is the subject of their written compositions and declamations”! Predatory image of Venice served to show that Ragusan independence was an exceptional achievement of the ruling patriciate, a result of a continuous struggle against the dangerous enemy whose outcome depends on the maximal cooperation and obedience of different social strata under patrician rule.

This figure of thought was endlessly repeated in Ragusan Renaissance and Baroque literature and historiography. Numerous texts glorified the wise patrician rule which managed to preserve Ragusan *libertà* against the Lion and Dragon (that is, Venice and Ottomans) and constantly compared the rest of Dalmatia suffering under the unjust

foreigner's rule of Venice with Ragusa which is depicted as an oasis of peace and justice. That such a conviction was far more than just a literary *topos* is visible from one testimony preserved in the court records of Ragusa. Namely, one morning in 1611, the secretary of Venetian Capitano di Golfo entered into a certain shop in Ragusa and there started to insult Ragusan patricians, saying that they are arrogant, suspicious of everyone, unjust and that they constantly work against Venetian interests. The shop owner – or at least so he claimed when interrogated by Ragusan senators – retaliated by launching a proper patriotic tirade, claiming that his signori were just and knew very well what they were doing. His speech culminated in a following sentence: “The Signori know very well what they are doing and they are good rulers and this people knows very well that while they rule, everybody here is far more free than in the rest of (Venetian) Dalmatia...”

However, Venice was not only a highly useful enemy. After all of this, it might come as a surprise that besides the “predatory” image of Venice, another very frequent representation of the Most Serene republic was its exact opposite - absolute glorification. Many Ragusans were honestly impressed with that masterpiece of self-representation which is usually called the “myth of Venice.” Thus, as many other Renaissance Europeans, Ragusan authors frequently echoed the words of Venetian apologists, such as Contarini, Sansovino or Sarpi, about Venice as the republic with the perfectly wise institutions, harmony between the public and private interests, social peace, virtuous patriciate, etc.

Yet such glorification of *Serenissima*, whether in diplomacy, historiography or literature, was frequently followed by one revealing statement: that Ragusa actually is very similar to Venice. Almost all of Ragusan historians state that their ancestors understood the “divine nature” of Venetian laws and used them in order to create their own commonwealth. One of the frequently repeated stereotypes was that Ragusa was *Venetia Minore* (the “Small Venice”). Perhaps the most surprising example of how widespread such parallelism between Venice and Ragusa was, is the fact that it was present even in the Ottoman Empire. Namely, in 17th century Turks occasionally referred to their tributary Ragusa as *Doubra Venedick* or *Doubrai Venedick* – «Good Venice»! Ragusan historians, in those rare occasions when they had to admit that Venice actually did rule Ragusa during the Middle ages, used those occasions to make a specific point. Thus, in the late sixteenth century S. Razzi claimed that those episodes of Venetian domination were less a direct rule or loss of *libertà*, but more of a course in political theory and practice. He claimed that in fact Ragusans themselves invited Venetians to rule their city in order to learn their wise political ways, and then, after learning all there was to learn, politely sent the Venetian count back home. This fascination with Venice and desire to seem similar to it went so far that it could even serve the purpose exactly the opposite from its original intention. Thus, one fifteenth-century French visitor to the city concluded that Ragusans are imitating Venetians literally - “like monkeys.”

The purpose, the concrete profit to be gained from this parallelism was prestige. Venice enjoyed the European-wide fame for its supposed political stability and wise constitution, being perhaps the greatest republican myth of the Early-modern period. Claiming that their republic was very similar to the Venetian one, Ragusans tried to steal a bit of shine from the Venetian myth, attempted to “parasitize” on the immense Venetian prestige. This parallelism Venice-Ragusa was used both in patriotic declamations at home, but

even more, in representing Ragusa to the European audiences. It seems to have worked well. Many European writers of 16th and 17th century – most famous being Sansovino and Bodin – when speaking of Ragusan republic accentuate the fact that its government is very similar to the Venetian, and that it owes its prosperity largely to that. Some ambitious Ragusans even went even further in developing this analogy. The French traveller Ricaut in the 17th century, describing Ragusa claims that its republican government, albeit similar to the Venetian, is even older! This is probably what he was told by his patriotic Ragusan hosts during his visit in the city: Venice, actually, is copying Ragusa.

Let me conclude by quoting one old Venetian proverb which runs something like: «That which Pietro says about Paolo, reveals more about Pietro than about Paolo.» This exactly was the case with the representations of Venice in Ragusan political culture. They reveal less about the «real» Venice, and far more about the ideological needs and self-representation of Ragusa itself. Ragusan patricians needed Venice as a demonized opponent in order to defend themselves from Venetian accusations abroad and to legitimize their rule on the domestic front. On the other hand, they also needed Venice as a glorious example of a perfect republic in order to be able to draw prestige from the undeniable similarities between their and Venetian political systems and cultures. The contradictoriness of those images – Venice oscillating from demonized oponent to the glorified republican «cousin» - reveals their instrumental nature. More precisely, it reveals two general truths about the image of the Other. First, as any other form of «identity», the image of the Other is also a «situational construct», dramatically depending on the changing circumstances and needs of the moment. Second, as a number of abovementiond examples have shown, image of the Other can be a thing of serious political relevance and many of the changes in its content are to be attributed to the influence of power. In other words, if image of oneself - the so-called self-representation – is a crucial tool of legitimation, so is the image of the Other. Albeit at moments a real and dangerous enemy, Venice also was highly useful and skillfully used in Renaissance Ragusa. Therefore, it seems fitting to finish with an appropriate common-place. As far as Ragusans were concerned, if Venice did not exist, one should have invented it.