

The Dissemination of News in Early Modern Venice

A Walk in the Company of the Informer Camillo Badoer

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At a first glance, the attention paid to the relationship between politics and information may seem strictly an issue of the present. However, a deeper look at the records of the *Inquisitori di stato*, nowadays held at the *Archivio di Stato* of Venice, can easily contradict that impression. The institution of the *Inquisitori di stato* dates back to 1539, initially under the name of the *Inquisitori sopra li secreti*, who were first entrusted with the task of watching over the spread of state secrets; later, this initial duty would have been joined also by that of organizing the intelligence and counter-intelligence services of the Most Serene Republic of Venice. The surviving clues of their activity allow the historian to retrace with certain accuracy the stance of the Venetian government towards the world of communication *media*, as well as the extent and the inner workings of the dissemination of news in a city and in an early modern state.

The seventeenth century represents an essential turning point in the history of communication *media*. The rise of an information market and of a periodical press, the explosion of the circulation of news, the first gradual and unusual emergence of a public opinion and of the sense of contemporaneity: all these phenomena were generated or had a full implementation, almost simultaneously, in seventeenth century Europe.¹ A series of convergent factors, developed

1 For an analysis of the evolution of the listed occurrences in the main European countries, see BARON/DOOLEY, 2001 and ROSPOCHER, 2012. On the relationship between the dissemination of news and the emergence of the sense of contemporaneity, in the same European perspective, see also DOOLEY, 2010. An essential reference bibliography on the history of information and periodical press

during the two previous centuries, was behind this peaceful revolution: the invention of the printing press, the establishment of regular postal services and of stable diplomatic representations, the improvement of communication lines, the colonial expansion of the European powers and the growth of the commercial routes, the creation of handwritten newsletters, already circulating in the sixteenth century through business letters.² With the passing of a few decades, the information burst into the public life of almost every city and every square of Europe, thus contributing to the creation of public spaces for political debate.

Venice, as other great European capitals, was one of the main centers involved in the development of this frenetic activity of production and circulation of news. Clearly, this novelty did not go unnoticed and the very first reactions of the Venetian government were under the sign of closure and repression; several times, in the attempt to stop or to control the publication of gazettes and handwritten newsletters, the Council of Ten fruitlessly legislated. The authorities quickly had to take note of the impossibility of a resolving intervention and had to adapt themselves to the new scenario: in fact, by that time the exchange of information was vital for the Republic's economic activities to be fully operational, as well as benefiting its politics.³ Indeed, the Venetian political system was characterized by the centrality of the debate, by the relative breadth of the ruling class and by the balance between different assemblies and powers: for those reasons it required a prompt and efficient exchange of information. Venice also soon learned to take advantage of the use of the new communication *media*: the opportunity to employ the written word in the political arena for propaganda, in particular thanks to the printing press, appeared with all its potential during the Interdict of 1606-1607 when, under the wise leadership of Paolo Sarpi, the Republic engaged in a previously unseen battle of writings against the Roman papacy.⁴

However, the use of such a powerful weapon could not be left in anyone's hands. Venice remained loyal to an elitist conception of politics, which was considered an exercise destined to a few and which had to remain surrounded by as much mystery as possible. Encouraging the dissemination of certain pieces of information automatically meant to allow the subjects greater involvement in

in Italy, among the others, I recommend, CASTRONOVO/TRANFAGLIA, 1976 (in particular the essays by VALERIO CASTRONOVO and GIUSEPPE RICUPERATI, through p. 1-66 and 67-116), FASANO GUARINI/ROSA, 2001, and INFELISE, 2005.

2 See INFELISE, 2005, p. V-X and BRIGGS/BURKE, 2009, in particular pages 25-132.

3 See INFELISE, 2005, and PRETO, 2010.

4 DE VIVO, 2007a.

the Republic's political affairs. Thus, the *Serenissima's* attitude considered from the perspective of political communication fluctuated between two opposite policies. If the need of an efficient exchange of information and the opportunity to take advantage of the use of communication *media* prevented taking repressive measures on one hand, the necessity to keep State secrets under control and to keep the masses away from politics, forced the government to carefully watch over the circulation of information under its dominions on the other, also due to the fragile balance between foreign powers that bore upon early modern Italy.

The task to keep the dissemination of news in Venice under control was mostly assigned to the informers at the service of the *Inquisitori di stato*. Their reports – the so-called *riferte* – are a precious instrument which allows us to shed light on the paths of the news and the mechanics of their spread, and can also contribute to integrate the traditional view 'from above' of political history with the perspective 'from below', typical of both social and cultural history. My analysis of Camillo Badoer's reports intends to follow this direction and provides insight into the utility of this type of source in search of those goals.

Camillo Badoer – alias Honorato Castelnovo alias colonel Costantino Castelnovo – appeared for the first time at the service of the *Inquisitori di stato* on the 23rd July 1671. We do not know much about him, apart from the fact that for almost twenty years he was one of the best informers in the business. He was a soldier, a literary man and a poet, and he was the natural son of the Venetian noble Alvise Badoer. His life sounds quite adventurous. Camillo, under the name of Costantino Castelnovo, was a veteran of the siege of Candia, where he stood out for his heroism to the extent that his deeds had a certain echo in the coeval chronicles.⁵ He certainly was a well-adjusted man. During his youth he attended the Paris military academy and could also count on several acquaintances in many Italian courts. After the end of the war of Candia, he served under the Venetian army as an infantry captain for a few years while at the same time starting a career as a spy. Putting to use the bonds he had established during his stay in Paris, Badoer was particularly successful in sneaking inside the French embassy

5 Archivio di Stato of Venice (from now on ASV), *Inquisitori di stato*, file 566, report from fra' Costantino's dated 18 December 1671. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. I have to add a curious note: in the same report it is written that one of those chronicles, the "Historie di Candia" composed by a certain "marquis Porone", assured public fame to Badoer, to the extent that the Spanish ambassador in Venice offered him employment in case of war on the Italian ground. Unfortunately, I could not find any further evidence of the existence of that book.

in Venice. However, he was one of the family also at the court of the Duke of Savoy, where in 1680 he took refuge when he had to run away from Venice in order to elude his creditors. His masterpiece as an infiltrator, however, happened at the court of the last Duke of Mantua, Ferdinando Carlo of Gonzaga-Nevers: he became poet and dramatist of the court and even one of the Duke's closer friends and most trustworthy counselors. His literary production is not that popular and consists of a few theatrical pieces and some poetry; we also know that he dedicated a manuscript – nowadays lost – to the Duchess of Savoy, which contained a historical and geographical survey of the kingdom of Portugal but never appeared in print. What we know for sure is that he often took advantage of his literary skills to facilitate his work.

At the beginning, his relationship with the *Inquisitori* was discontinuous and frequently passed through the mediation of his brother friar Costantino, also an informer; it became constant in the late seventies of the century.⁶ A reward of thirty ducats was his annual wage, which definitely was not a great amount of money. Up to July 1680 he used to write his reports under another false identity, signing himself as Honorato Castelnovo; subsequently he revealed his true identity to the *Inquisitori* and obtained the guarantee of anonymity.⁷ After all, the craft of a spy could be a dangerous one. He kept writing regularly until the 26th February 1688, the date of his last report. Then he suddenly disappeared and from that moment I have completely lost trace of him.

Four voluminous files hold all of Camillo Badoer's reports that have survived the passing of time. They contain a wide range of topics. In every single report we can find a widely different kind of news: prostitutes and bandits share the written space with the greatest European monarchs, just like international politics, wars and diplomacy are shoulder to shoulder with the small facts of everyday life. He basically dealt with everything that could attract the attention of the *Inquisitori di stato*, turning himself into a precious guide for anyone wanting to understand what Venice was like at the end of the seventeenth century. Following his footprints, we can realize the main concerns of the Venetian authorities, as well as the dangers perceived by the community, the interests and the affairs of a large group of individuals that lived under the protective shadow of the institutions. Through his words we can also witness the first dubious footsteps

6 Badoer provided similar services also to other Italian courts: see INFELISE, 2007 and ASV, *Inquisitori di Stato*, file 597, reports from Giovanni Fossali dated 2 August, 5 September and 28 November 1672.

7 ASV, *Inquisitori di Stato*, File 566, report from Honorato Castelnovo dated 31 May 1677; file 567, report from Camillo Badoer dated 7 November 1682.

of public opinion in its infancy; we can experience at first hand the relationships between sovereigns and subjects and between the universe of politics and the rise of the *media*. Without knowing it, Camillo Badoer was in the middle of the crux of the passing from the seventeenth century to the Enlightenment.

Collecting reliable information was the main task of a good spy. That meant, if we translate it into the daily activity, to cultivate interpersonal relationships and to mingle in a wide variety of ambiances. Looking through Badoer's reports, politics in seventeenth century Venice was in its raw essence the result of intense idle talk based on very articulated relationships networks. Sure enough, the oral as well as the written dimension played a significant part in the dissemination of information. Quoting Joseph Brodsky: Was not Venice the city whose life occurred according to "the immanent logic of gossip"?⁸ In the information exchange the patricians, who by birth held the right to take part to the Republic's political life, were not the only social group involved: individuals of various social and professional ranks also contributed to a considerable degree to that exchange. Bureaucrats and servants, artisans and notaries, members of the clergy and intellectuals: almost everyone who could regularly come into possession of news could be part of one of the entangled networks of informers that spread information from the government palaces all over the city and vice versa.

In order to be well-informed, it was decisive to be able to reach the proper sources. For instance, treating the gondolier of an ambassador to lunch could be quite a simple way to know the ambassador's movements and those of his entourage; being friendly with one of his servants or secretaries often provided one with an open ear inside the embassy. And, of course, a love affair was not always a simple romantic matter. Thanks to Camillo Badoer's patient and meticulous work, the *Inquisitori di stato* were always up-to-date about the suspicious frequentations of the French ambassador. Consequently we are also kept abreast. Among his informers we will obviously not find prominent figures of the Venetian political scene nor shall we find traitors plotting against the Republic. The risk of being caught and charged for treason was real.⁹ Actually, it was a less scandalous matter mainly concerning obscure individuals, often bounded for many different reasons to one or more patricians, clever enough to provide confidential information – or at least clever enough to make people believe that

8 BRODSKY, 2010, p. 43.

9 That risk was actually high, at least considering the execution for treason of the patrice Antonio Foscarini, ordered by the Council of Ten in April 1622. One year later Foscarini had been posthumously proclaimed innocent because his trial was based on false testimonies. See WALKER, 2007.

– and willing to put themselves to use for personal profit. For example, in the French embassy we meet with a certain frequency one of Venice’s most talked-about writers of handwritten newsletters, Benedetto Giuliani, with his son and co-worker Paolo; a certain Valentino, a popular ball player, well-known in the city due to his sporting accomplishments and his illustrious acquaintances; father Mozzarelli, confessor at the Frari’s monastery, who was used to associate with several Venetian nobles; a certain Alessandro Rizzo, an ambiguous wheeler dealer, who could count on various acquaintances inside the Republic’s institutions and among the local aristocracy.¹⁰ Through them and many other people, rumors and information regarding confidential political affairs could come to the ambassador’s ears directly from the residence of some patricians or from the Republic’s bureaucracy.

Women were not excluded from these relationships networks either. Usually, they were noble nuns or prostitutes. The noble Camilla Duodo, nun at St. Cosmas’ convent, situated in the Giudecca, was an intimate confidante of the Spanish ambassador; Foscarina Foscari, also a nun at San Cosmas’, was the confidante both of the French and the Spanish ambassadors and had a solid reputation as an expert in the affairs of state. Even St. Lawrence’s convent, where noble nuns were often accommodated, was the destination of continuous and strictly male pilgrimages; despite the prohibitions that regulated the nuns’ life, the convent was usually frequented by trusted men sent, “with the order of pursuing”, by the foreign ambassadors in Venice. Indeed, it was difficult to understand what exactly separated the seeking of information from the rituals of courtship. Much less complicated, instead, was the case of a certain “Angela Padoanina” or “Padana”; she was a notorious prostitute, lover of many Venetian noblemen and in turn of the French and the Spanish ambassadors, to whom she was regularly passing confidential information.¹¹ It is evident that the rivalry between the two crowns could also bring some advantages.

10 ASV, *Inquisitori di stato*, file 566, report from fra’ Costantino dated 27 April 1673; file 566, report from Honorato Castelnovo dated 26 February 1676 *more veneto*; file 566, report from Honorato Castelnovo dated 24 November 1677. For a brief period, in 1679, Alessandro Rizzo himself also worked as an informer for the Venetian Republic: see ASV, *Inquisitori di Stato*, file 626.

11 File 566, report from Honorato Castelnovo not dated, but probably dating back to the beginning of 1676; file 566, report from Honorato Castelnovo dated 5 July 1677; file 566, report from Honorato Castelnovo dated 30 July 1678; file 566, report from Honorato Castelnovo dated 4 June 1679; file 567, reports from Camillo Badoer dated 19 November 1682 and 3 December 1682.

For the Venetian ruling class, secrecy represented the first safeguard of the Republic's freedom, cohesion and serenity, as well as a sort of collective form of respect due to the state. However, quoting Filippo De Vivo, "the control over political communication could hardly be complete in a ruling class where information was at the disposal of hundreds of patricians, each one surrounded by an often large household, as well as non-patrician servants, clients, and friends."¹² Even the Doge's Palace was not impenetrable. On the 22nd September 1684, Camillo Badoer informed the *Inquisitori di stato* that a Doge's servant, "the one with red hair", was known "by many in the square who bring news to the ambassadors and to other ministers of the foreign princes", reporting to them what he could hear "in the chambers of His Serenity".¹³ Not bad for a Republic that considered secrecy as a supreme good to be preserved for the state's security.

Finally, there is one last aspect on which I would like to focus before concluding. By reading Badoer's reports we can immediately notice that, at the end of the seventeenth century, ordinary people used to discuss publicly and frequently in Venice. They discussed various topics: wars, politics, religion, or the events that impressed contemporaries and this was probably the only way to try to make sense of them all. They discussed routinely for delight, in order to spend time, to challenge the institutions and they did it almost everywhere. In the public squares, for instance, where pitchman used to sell books, pamphlets, almanacs, prints and flying sheets for a handful of money, which were passed from hand to hand, thus providing the raw material for the discussions.¹⁴ It was not necessary to be able to read: it was sufficient to listen and be willing to voice one's opinion on the various facts of the world. By interacting within the public space, everyone could compare himself with other people and thus be part of the community.

Judging by the available sources, many people participated and not always in a pacific manner. A report from friar Costantino, Badoer's brother, is rather explicit in this regard. In 1676, writing to the *Inquisitori* about some contradictions between different handwritten newsletters, the friar wrote that in St. Mark's square "hundreds of people" used to form various "conventicles" of "factionists", and among them, "due to the opposite subjects of the news spread", "great mutiny, aversion, insults" often occurred, which sometimes were followed by

12 DE VIVO, 2007a, p. 46.

13 ASV, *Inquisitori di stato*, file 547, report from Camillo Badoer dated 22 September 1684.

14 See BELLETTINI, 2000.

“beatings, slaps and punches”.¹⁵ Military news mainly exasperated the contrasts and deteriorated the discussions, with the help of the defiant attitude of many lower class people.¹⁶ In particular, the siege of Vienna and the war of the Holy League against the Turk gave Badoer the opportunity to record some odd behavior, as those illustrated by a certain Antonio Coi, who had previously lived in the Ottoman dominions as a renegade for twelve years. Naturally, Coi took the side of the Turk Empire in public, causing “the scandal and the hatred of the good Christians who hear him talking”, and laughed at the Italian sovereigns, by saying that they were “assholes” and that they couldn’t “wage war like the Turk does”; some eye-witnesses declared to Badoer that they would have wanted “to spit in his face and that they would have taken away his tongue for the cruelty of his soul.”¹⁷ Scenes like these were rather common.

A fundamental role in the dissemination of news was also played by some shops, where customers could regularly find various printed gazettes and hand-written newsletters. Pharmacists and barbers, in particular, used to supply this kind of service from the beginning of the seventeenth century. The prices of medicines were set by the government, thus the competition among the shops was evident in the offer of this kind of extra services, which could also include gambling tables, postal services and many more. Pharmacies and barber shops carried out an important role of mediation “between private households and the marketplace”;¹⁸ they were definitely spaces of socialization where people of different social status could collect information and discuss with other customers.¹⁹ The crucial role of these shops in the dissemination of news in Venice is well exemplified by the case of the apothecary of the *Vigilanza*, at the *Procuratie vecchie* in St. Mark’s square. It was regularly attended by writers and patricians and in its surroundings “different kind of very many people stay to discuss about all the peculiarities of the wars and about the interests of the princes.” The pharmacy of the *Vigilanza* was so well-known in town as a center of communication that the foreign ambassadors, hunting for news, according to Badoer’s reports, could not refrain from sending their own informers there.²⁰ It

15 ASV, *Inquisitori di stato*, File 566, report from fra’ Costantino dated 19 December 1676.

16 See INFELISE, 1997.

17 File 547 report from Camillo Badoer dated 30 August 1683.

18 See DE VIVO, 2007a, p. 101.

19 See ID., 2007b, p. 505-521; ID., 2007a.

20 ASV, *Inquisitori di stato*, file 547, report from Camillo Badoer dated 6 August 1684.

seemed that also Antonio Coi, the Ottoman Empire's supporter, used to go there frequently, spreading his usual refrain and provoking the disgusted reactions of those present.²¹

In fragile junctures, especially concerning international politics or the national safety, Camillo Badoer frequently reported similar episodes and this is a clear indication of the concern that moved the Venetian authorities, as well as a sign of the vitality of the public space. However, every attempt to stop or hold down the flowing of rumors and news was unrealistic, and every measure came inevitably too late. During the summer of 1687, while the Venetian army was engaged against the Turk in the Peloponnesus, contrasting news on the war's issues incited the discussions among the curious public. On the 30th July 1687 Badoer reported the appearance in town of quite an odd "academy", located in a private residence. In the palace of the noble Quintiliano Rezzonico someone was debating "whether it would be more profitable to this Republic to win or to lose" in war; there were also printed invitations posted "everywhere in Venice, in the shops, on the bridges and in the most frequented streets." In fact, many people "from all nations" rushed there to hear the discussion, causing great scandal in town.²²

The following week, Camillo Badoer was walking around from shop to shop and reading the newsletters. In a pharmacy he encountered a sheet where it was written that General Morosini, in command of the Venetian army in the Peloponnesus, was short of soldiers and that his dispatches brought bad news. Those present wondered how it was possible to write such damaging news for the Republic with impunity. Then, he moved to another pharmacy near Rialto, where he found other newsletters and he was startled by a detail. The sheet informed that during the previous week "at the house of the nobleman Rezonico was held a public academy where they discussed if it would be more useful for the Republic to win or to lose in war."²³ The circle was closed. It was evident that trying to stop the stream of words, written or spoken, was an impossible task, if not a foolish ambition. The public political debate, fed by the constant flow of news circulating in town, came from the oral dimension and went back into the written communication from which it had generated, in turn giving life to new infinite discussions.

21 File 547, report from Camillo Badoer dated 3 September 1683.

22 File 548, report from Camillo Badoer dated 30 July 1687.

23 File 548, report from Camillo Badoer dated 5 August 1687.

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