



Introduction by **Giovanni Bazoli**

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(to the Cini Foundation International Conference “Sustainability of local commons with a global value: the case of Venice and its Lagoon”)

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The conference that I have the honour of introducing today is being held on a date indelibly inscribed in the history of Venice. Exactly fifty years ago, on 4 November 1966, people worldwide responded – initially with amazement and then with offers of help – to the news that Venice and Florence had been devastated by flooding.

Initially the focus of attention was the flooding in Florence, possibly because it was thought that high tides in Venice was nothing new. But the perception of what was happening changed as soon as television news and the press showed the exceptional extent of the flooding that had struck Venice (with a high tide almost two metres above sea level) and especially the threat to the survival of the city due to the collapse of some of the Pellestrina *murazzi* (defensive sea walls constructed along the edge of the lagoon in the mid-18th century by the Venetian Republic).

Leading international personalities visited Venice and soon realised that the city’s problems now had to be tackled according to a new logic imposed by the dramatic events. It was no longer sufficient to make commitments concerning Venice’s economic and social future, as had been done until then. Now there was a realisation that economic and physical safeguards had to be addressed together with the protection of the environmental, artistic and cultural heritage.

That this combined approach was necessary had appeared obvious to the many experts and more perceptive representatives of public opinion even in the years before 1966. I should like to mention the contribution of the Fondazione Cini in this sense at a major conference in 1962. Rereading the proceedings of that conference we find all the themes that should have been tackled in time and that the events of 4 November 1966 then made indispensable.

On examining the studies and research conducted after the flood, due mention must be made of the important contribution in identifying a strategy for the future of the city and lagoon furnished by the “UNESCO Report on Venice”. Drafted by Louis Jacques Rollet Adriane and Michel Conil Lacoste, the report had a cogent preface by René Maheu and was published in Italy in 1969, just three years after the flood. And so it is highly significant and fitting that the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, has agreed to give the opening speech at this conference. I should, therefore, like to offer her my heartfelt thanks for having enriched our proceedings with her authoritative presence and thoughts on the subject.

In the fifty years since 1966 – this is the question today – what has changed for Venice and its lagoon?

The Italian government has intervened with two Special Laws, in 1973 and 1984, establishing the following objectives: protect Venice and Chioggia from *acque alte*

(exceptional high tides); re-establish the hydrodynamic equilibrium in the lagoon; preserve the environment from pollution; boost the socio-economic life of the city; and safeguard its architectural, artistic and historical heritage.

To implement the Special Laws and the law for their enactment, the Italian state allocated and spent a total of almost 12 billion euros. Most of the funds were used in safeguarding against high water, through works to reinforce the sea defences and the Mose project; some minor resources were employed for the objectives of cleaning the lagoon, repairing its damaged morphology and protecting the art heritage. The finances were mainly entrusted to the Consorzio Venezia Nuova. Its management of the projects, however, was blemished by some serious episodes of waste and corruption, which have unfortunately deeply undermined the credibility of the Venetian community both nationally and internationally.

The Venetian model of economic development has witnessed a radical change in recent years, which the special laws did not contemplate: the definitive collapse of the industrial development model, launched in the first post-war period at Marghera, and its replacement by a model of post-industrial development increasingly based on tourism. Although it has certainly brought earnings, tourism has mainly grown with day-trippers and, as such, has tended to thwart the balanced development of high-quality, differentiated businesses in the city and most of the metropolitan area.

Obviously a fragile city like Venice cannot bear the burden of an unstoppable growing wave of mass tourism (now over 25 million visitors a year) without being irreparably altered not only in economic terms but also as regards the civic and social fabric of its community.

The change is already ongoing, as demonstrated by the facts and figures and some alarming signals. The most significant figure is the fall in the number of residents in the historic centre, now down to less than 55,000 and mainly made up of elderly people living in modest conditions. This phenomenon must also be linked, at least in part, to the inability to manage the development of tourism, which has produced a continual decline in permanent housing with a consequent rise in the cost of buying or renting houses for local residents, especially young people.

Venice is in danger of gradually losing its identity and unity, since the community is increasingly divided by lobbies and vested interests; its buildings and *palazzi* are converted into hotels and supermarkets, and there is a blatant decline in the quality of shops and commercial offerings as mass tourism predominates.

In this context Venice's unique artistic and monumental heritage is also inevitably considered more as a resource to be exploited than a heritage to be protected. One emblematic case is the debate over large cruise ships sailing through the Bacino di San Marco or the Canale della Giudecca.

Studies and conferences on the future of Venice over the last fifty years have attempted to take into account this new situation. They have made efforts to reconcile the requirements for physical and environmental protection with those for safeguarding the artistic-cultural heritage while encouraging the economic and social development of the city.

Many authoritative Italian experts have taken part in these debates but have rarely adopted convergent stances. Mainly having arisen over the solutions to the problem of



the physical safeguard of the city, the contrasts have not helped those responsible to make clear, credible decisions. There is still a lack of a shared strategy at local, regional and national level to enable us to design a sustainable development model for Venice and its lagoon.

In the fiftieth anniversary year of the flood of 1966, the Fondazione Cini has set itself the problem of how to contribute to designing such a strategy. Having ruled out the idea of yet another conference with the same (mainly Italian) speakers as in the debates of recent years, initially we thought of inviting some of the most authoritative experts worldwide in various fields of knowledge, and asking each of them to offer their own vision of the city's future. But then we considered the fact that any strategic vision of Venice cannot ignore the restrictions and conditionings due to the environment in which it is to be pursued, i.e. the institutional context. This means the juridical, political and administrative situation of Venice now and in the future, which leads to the real issue at stake of establishing what conditions are necessary for a project to be implemented. In other words, how to achieve the necessary agreement on the requirements and urgency of the objective to be reached.

So we began to move towards the idea – also confirmed by the international responses already made on 4 November 1966 and then increasingly frequently afterwards – that Venice and its lagoon are a local commons with a global value. They are local as a specific geographic and historical reality, and their value is global because their sustainability is a matter of concern for the whole international community. Moreover, its sustainability is exceptionally complex, since it involves interlocking environmental, economic, social and cultural aspects.

Left to spontaneous market forces, a local commons runs the risk – by its very nature – of being overexploited with excessive social costs and growing threats to its future sustainability. A local commons must therefore be governed. Of course, this does not mean running wholly counter to the market, but using the market in the socially most appropriate way. But should it be governed by local authorities or also by representatives of all communities for which it is a value? This issue of governance must inevitably be raised in the case of Venice and its lagoon, since the values associated with their safeguard are of interest to the whole world.

From this point of view, the problems concerning the common good of “Venice and its lagoon” are an emblematic of the issue of sustainability for all commons with a global value in any part of the world.

What does all this entail? That ultimately to make a contribution to the shaping of a strategy of sustainability for Venice there is a necessary (although not sufficient) condition requiring the involvement of foreign experts in the various disciplines bound up with the complexity of the problem. In fact, faced with the problem of Venice, they can make a contribution not only from the point of view of their specific competence in a given discipline, but also by referring to other situations they are familiar with that may provide useful suggestions for tackling Venice's problems.

We thus decided to invite non-Italian experts (the only Italians at this conference are the session moderators), not through any elitist sense of exclusiveness but because, as I said, the many important Italian experts on Venice have already made their voices heard at this time and will continue to do so in the future.



We provided the international experts with information, hopefully as objective and exhaustive as possible, on the evolution of the problems of Venice and its lagoon, in the form of a document drafted by a working group at the Foundation. We asked our guests to respond to this information, each from the point of view of their own particular discipline and to use their knowledge of international examples to situate the problem of Venice and its lagoon within a general reference framework based on issues of local commons with a global value.

We are confident that on the grounds of their competence and authority the speakers will engage in a fruitful dialogue that will yield some important suggestions. And we would like to think that all those responsible in various ways for deciding the future of Venice will take into account the suggestions made at this conference.