

AN ISLAND FOR EVERYONE

Poveglia as contested public space in the Venetian Lagoon

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the story of the proposed privatisation of Poveglia, a small uninhabited island in the Venetian Lagoon. In March 2014 the Italian State Property Office announced that a 99-year lease on Poveglia would be offered for sale in an online auction. The reaction of some citizens led to the formation of the association Poveglia per Tutti (Poveglia for Everyone), whose activists and supporters wanted the island to be preserved as a public space and blocked the acquisition. The article firstly frames Poveglia in the processes that are particular to the small islands of the Venetian Lagoon, from abandonment to tourism-related 'land grabbing', and then contextualises the story of this minor island in a more general discussion regarding broader 'right to the island' narratives and practices with reference to some other European cases. Finally, the article presents the results of an ethnographically informed analysis of the association Poveglia per Tutti to discuss the capacity and potentialities of some small islands - as separate, limited, and identifiable spaces - to be part of territorialisation processes dealing with active citizenship, resistance to tourist monoculture and the usability of public space. In this way, Poveglia becomes a synecdoche for the whole of Venice and its lagoon, 'condensing', at the same time, local and global dynamics.

KEYWORDS: Island grabbing, public space, social movements, island narratives and practices, Poveglia, Venetian Lagoon

Introduction

The small abandoned island of Poveglia, located in the Venetian Lagoon, was the subject of a previous article by the authors that appeared in *Shima* 14 n1, where we discussed why, when and how the island gained global renown as 'the world's most haunted island' (Cavallo and Visentin, 2020). Our aim was to bring to light the complexity of an apparently trivial island imagery: the discussion on ghosts led us to the possibility of bringing together theoretical academic discourse and popular narratives, considering not only the way specific island narratives are built and told but also the way they are approached, lived, and practised (Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 2013; Vanolo 2018). In second consideration of Poveglia, we focus our attention on the dynamics which led the Agenzia del Demanio ('Italian State Property Office') to offer the island for sale in 2014 and the consequent formation of an association, Poveglia per Tutti ('Poveglia for Everyone'), whose activists and supporters believe that the island should be preserved as a public space. So, we move from the 'ghost island' narratives

and practices to the ‘right to the island’ ones, always bearing in mind that both levels centre on the same small island in the Venetian Lagoon. Here Poveglia allows us to discuss specific territorialisation processes dealing with active citizenship, resistance to tourism monoculture and the usability of public space. In this sense, the international role played by some small islands that have been claimed as public spaces or protected areas by grassroots movements against neo-liberal politics offers us the opportunity to discuss a local problem in a global perspective and a wider framework: islands as symbols of freedom and civic self-determination with regard to land-use choices and territorial visions.

The findings of this article are the result of a documentary and ethnographically informed method, drawing on a variety of secondary and primary sources. The data collection included three main stages: document analysis, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Through all these stages, we used theoretical and interpretative tools mainly drawn from Island Studies, Tourism Studies and a selection of literature about social movements. The first stage consisted of analysing secondary data: archival and cartographic sources, as well as various policy, planning, place management and development documents. The second stage of data collection was participant observation¹: we adopted mobile methods of data collection, attending internal meetings of the associations, public assemblies, demonstrations, and conferences organised by Poveglia per Tutti or with its contributions (Figure 1). In the third stage, we conducted nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with office holders or active members of the association identified during participant observation.²



Figure 1 - “privatisation of everything = deprivation of everyone” - slogan on a banner held by Poveglia per Tutti members during a demonstration organised by the NOGRANDINAVI (‘No big ships’) movement in Venice on 10th June 2018 (photograph by Francesco Visentin).

¹ It should be specified that the first named author of this article is a member of Poveglia per Tutti.

² All quotations from interviews in subsequent sections in Italian have been translated by the authors.

In the first section we discuss the context of the abandonment suffered by many minor islands of the Venetian Lagoon as an example of the political/economic, mainly tourism industry driven, process of land grabbing. Then we include Poveglia Island in a more general discussion regarding 'right to the island' narratives and practices, using some reference examples such as Cabrera and Sa Dragonera in Spain, Ulva in Scotland and CPH-Ø1, a public artificial floating island in Denmark. In the following two sections we first reconstruct the origins and the formation of the association Poveglia per Tutti by a group of citizens responding to the attempt to privatise the island, and, finally, we analyse the ideas, wishes, dynamics and visions of the association, as directly represented to us by the activists we interviewed. As we will explain, Poveglia per Tutti's experience gave us the opportunity to interpret Poveglia as a synecdoche of Venice and as a 'place of condensation', a distillation of local and global dynamics at the same time.

The minor islands of the Venetian Lagoon: from abandonment to tourism-related land grabbing

The Venetian Lagoon hosts 112 *insule*³, which compose the historical city centre, and around 70 outer islands, many of which are of small size. During the long historical period of the Venetian Ducato and, later, of the Venetian Republic (from the 17th to 18th Century), the minor islands of the Venetian Lagoon were part of the urban archipelagic system as integrated peripheries, essentially used as sites of monastic orders; for peri-urban agriculture,⁴ fishing and aquaculture; for sanitary confinement (historically for the crews of the ships and, later on, as secure facilities for the mentally ill or sanatoriums); and as defensive or military fortifications. While the minor islands are relatively remote from the city centre, some have been regularly frequented and used by the local population in the manners outlined above. The majority of those islands, including some very small ones, were also permanently inhabited, contributing to the city's overall assemblage of terrestrial and watery spaces, entangled with and linked by a series of canals and *ghebi* (smaller and shallower canals). Minor islands were an integral part of a hybrid environment, where mixed uses, practices and behaviours took place, transcending the binary concept of water and land, wetland and island, maritime and coastal, giving life to an aquapelagic space with its peculiar values, attitudes and wet ontologies (Hayward, 2012; Suwa, 2012).

The end of the Serenissima Repubblica in 1797, the subsequent annexation to Austria and later to France (for a short period) and the eventual incorporation of Venice in the new-born Italian State in 1866, resulted in the ascendancy of exogenous governance logics, accompanied by the irruption of modernity in the urban layout of the water city. A key practical and symbolic moment in this regard was the building of the railway bridge linking Venice with the mainland in 1846; and the construction of the road bridge (1933) definitively consecrated that fixed link with the mainland in a process which has shifted the development trajectory of many near islands all over the world (Baldacchino [ed], 2007). During the 20th Century and, in particular, from the Second World War on, the marginalisation of the lagoon and its minor islands increased: they were more and more perceived as remote and always less functional to new socio-economic needs and lifestyles. On the other hand, from the 1970s onwards, interest in the history and traditions of the lagoon increased, occasionally

³ The term is a vernacularisation which derives from the Latin word *insulae* and refers to urban units usually gathered around a *campo* (square) and delimited by water spaces.

⁴ See Bonardi and Cavallo (2015) and Cavallo and Mastrovito (in press).

appealing to a wide audience. The starting point of this process can be considered the groundbreaking exhibition held in 1970 in Palazzo Grassi (Ministero dell'Interno), while a much more recent pivotal moment occurred in 2015 with the Palazzo Ducale exhibition dedicated to the evolution of local food supply chains (Calabi and Galeazzo, 2015).

The inexorable abandonment of many minor islands of the lagoon went almost unnoticed until 1978, when the Settemari Rowing Association organised a photographic exhibition⁵, followed by a catalogue destined to become a seminal book in this field: *Isole abbandonate della Laguna: Com'erano e come sono* ('Abandoned Islands of the Lagoon: How they were and how they are'), written by two scholars and rowing enthusiasts, the brothers Giorgio and Maurizio Crovato⁶. The exhibition and the publication of the book, which, following John Ruskin's suggestion (1851/2004), combined current pictures with historical archive maps and drawings, were at the same time a complaint and a moment of awareness for citizens and public opinion in general, concerning the state of degradation and abandonment into which many islands had slipped. The toponyms of these islands were still well present as markers of the local geographies, but many Venetians had lost any material engagement with them.

Despite growing awareness of the issues raised above, the degradation has continued inexorably in many publicly owned and in the updated 2009 edition of their book, Giorgio and Maurizio Crovato listed the abandoned and endangered islands as follows:

Madonna del Monte, former convent then military powder keg, now at risk of extinction, Sant'Ariano, former ossuary, La Cura, where the 18th Century farmhouse has recently collapsed, San Secondo, where the Austrian fort is at risk, Santo Spirito, in danger of disappearing, San Giorgio in Alga, where architectural friezes and marbles were recently stolen, at risk of collapsing, Sant'Angelo delle Polveri, a post war abandoned military structure, in precarious condition. The former military batteries: Campana or Podo, Ex Poveglia, Fisolo, Trezze. The Octagons⁷: Alberoni, Abbandonato, Ca' Roman, San Pietro. (2008: 15).

Among these small islands, Poveglia, located in the Southern Lagoon between Giudecca and Lido and composed of a main part of 7.5 hectares – crossed by a narrow canal - and the facing 16th Century Octagon battery (the one referred to as 'Ex Poveglia' in the above quotation), had a similar evolution (Figure 2).

Populated during the 13th and 14th centuries, in the 19th Century Poveglia became a restricted area, a *lazzaretto* (confinement station) for plague victims and in the 20th Century, a *Stazione Sanitaria Marittima* ('Maritime Sanitary Station') and then a sanatorium (Busato and Sfameni, 2018; Cavallo and Visentin, 2020). After the 1968 closure of the sanatorium, the island was almost totally left alone, with its buildings slowly falling into ruin, leaving a vacuum to be filled with stories, narratives and practices – an 'emptiness' left by the abandonment (Cavallo and Visentin, 2020).

⁵ The same association also organised several group rowing trips to a different abandoned island each year from 1994 onwards.

⁶ The book was republished in 2009, with a new introduction and English translation.

⁷ The Octagons are small islands hosting an octagonal fortification. They were fortified in 1571, as part of the defensive system of the lagoon.



Figure 2 – Bird’s-eye view of Poveglia island (courtesy of Riccardo Roiter Rigoni). In the background at the left, the island of Sacca Sessola (recently renamed ‘Isola delle Rose’) and, in the centre, the islands of Santo Spirito, San Clemente and La Grazia (and with central Venice on the horizon).

However, over the last decades the degradation of publicly owned islands in the lagoon has been partially offset by different phenomena. On the one hand, thanks to some institutional and entrepreneurial actors and to some sectors of the civil society, some islands have been saved from degradation, converted for new purposes and returned to public use. For example, the cultural and environmental heritage of Lazzaretto Nuovo islands has been restored and opened to the public thanks to the volunteer Ekos Club and Venetian Archeoclub, which regularly organises archaeological camps on the island⁸; San Servolo Island has been converted into an international university study camp and convention centre by the initiative of the Venice Province (while, at the same time retaining the painful memories of the former mental asylum through an archive and a permanent exhibition); while Certosa Island has been converted into a park with a marina run by the company Vento di Venezia and is now a centre for sailing sports activities.⁹

On the other hand, a specific countertrend has been taking shape: the sale and consequently acquisition of the islands by private buyers with the purpose of transforming them into second homes or accommodation facilities. An example of the former is the Island of Santa

⁸ The Archeoclub Venezia excavation and research activity concerns also other islands in the lagoon. It is noteworthy to point out that one of their information sheets is dedicated to the island of Poveglia (Fazzini and Cattani, 2014). The Archeoclub also has membership of Poveglia per Tutti.

⁹ In 2020-2021 it was announced that Certosa island would be the site of a new enogastronomic tourism development intended to utilise local agricultural product. This proposal met with some opposition and is yet to eventuate.

Cristina, used by the owners or rented out as a private island retreat. Examples of the latter have involved the construction in of the luxury Kempinsky Palace Hotel on San Clemente (which until 1992 hosted the city asylum for women) in 2003 and the transformation of Sacca Sessola, with its public sanatorium, into another hotel (which went bankrupt and was replaced in 2015 by a Marriott chain resort). The island's original toponym is a denotative and local one: the term *sacca* indicates an artificial island formed by an accumulation of debris (in this case from the digging for the commercial port of Santa Marta in 1870), while Sessola refers to the shape of the island, elongated like a boat bailer (*visè sessola* in the Venetian dialect). The marketing choice to replace it with the much more globally evocative Isola delle Rose ('Roses' Island') represents a clear tourism industry rebranding of a former public island. Poveglia itself has also been the target of tourist transformation projects, one in 1985 by the Italian Touring Club and Club Méditerranée and one in 1998 by the CTS-Centro Turistico Studentesco, but they were never realised. From 2015 onwards, other State Property Office owned islands of the lagoon have been included in calls for bids during the four phases of Valore Paese Fari, a project aimed at awarding fifty-years leases on lighthouses, towers and other coastal facilities to private entrepreneurs willing to transform them according to what is known as "the lighthouse accommodation model" (Agenzia del Demanio, nd) - a low-impact and sustainable approach to re-utilising heritage assets. The lagoon islands of San Secondo and Ca' Roman Octagon have been allocated in the fourth phase (2018) and will host, respectively, a guesthouse and three suites besides a glamping ('glamour camping') option (ibid).

This trend towards the consumption of island spaces as pleasure peripheries can be interpreted as a form of 'island grabbing'. But, unlike the international phenomenon linked to the industrialisation of the sea and the exploitation of marine resources (Ratter, 2017), which occurs especially in the Pacific and Indian oceans, it is fundamentally an internal political and economic affair. Strong economic actors, mostly from the tourism sector, endowed with high purchasing power, 'grab' minor islands' spaces and, in this way, remove them from public use¹⁰. In Venice this has involved a progressive expansion of tourism companies or interests that have previously congregated in (and almost saturated) the historical city centre. Favoured by successive administrations, they have found new spaces both in the outer lagoon and on the mainland¹¹. This would not be possible without the decision to sell public island spaces by local and national administrations (or para-administrative public bodies), which have thereby abdicated their civil mission, and implicit electoral mandate, to preserve the public heritage and invest in 'brownfield land' with new planning visions. On the other hand, the sales revenue, although markedly below market values, contributes to improving the public budget and, at the same time, relieves the public authorities from maintenance and safety-related costs and duties.

¹⁰ Needless to say, the private islands of the lagoon are not served by public transport but only by taxis and hotel shuttles and the privacy of the guests is protected by discouraging any other docking and disembarkation.

¹¹ Salerno (2018) has highlighted that Mestre and Marghera (in the immediate Venetian inland) have witnessed a significant increase in short-term holiday rentals and Airbnb in recent years, which shows that tourism may also commodify the mainland part of the Venice municipality, expanding its horizons far beyond the limits of the historic city. The opening between 2018 and 2019 of new hostels and hotels in Via Ca' Marcello, close to Mestre railway station (for a total capacity of around 2000 additional beds) confirms the trend.

The ‘Right to the Island’: Nissological Narratives and Praxis

As we wrote in our first article dedicated to Poveglia (Cavallo and Visentin, 2020), this small, abandoned island has been subject to some of the land grabbing gambits described above. Over the last fifteen or so years, it has become the nexus of two intersecting narratives and practices whose interaction has become increasingly meta-geographical and globally spread, transcending the Venetian island itself.

Our 2020 article analysed the narrative and practices concerning ‘haunted’ Poveglia. The topic of the present article, being focused on an association of citizens claiming the island as a public space to be rescued from abandonment while staying accessible and liveable for anyone, refers instead to what we could call, paraphrasing Lefebvre (1968), the ‘right to the island narrative.’ By this, we refer to the emblematic role played by some small islands that have been claimed by citizens or grassroots movements against privatisation or neo-liberal development politics as public spaces, places to live in and/or as protected areas. For example, Cabrera and Sa Dragonera, two small outer islands of Mallorca in the Balearic archipelago, perfectly fit into this case. In 1972 two Mallorcan associations (Societat d’Història Natural de les Balears and Obra Cultural Balear) strongly opposed the privatisation of Cabrera. The fight was relaunched at the end of the eighties by Greenpeace Spain, with the support of the local environmentalist association GOB (Grupo Ornitológico Balear) and ended up with the creation of a protected area, the Cabrera National Park, in 1991 (Rayó, 2004). In 1977, Sa Dragonera attracted attention when it was occupied by the collectives Terra i Llibertat and Talaiot Corcat (Rayó, 2004) in opposition to its touristic development by a private company that had bought it three years earlier. Sustained, once more, by Obra Cultural Balear and GOB, the initiative was followed by a legal battle against the privatisation and for the environmental protection of the island, until it was finally acquired by the local government in 1987 and some years later was declared a Natural Park (ibid). Both events have resonated internationally and have given the population of the Balearic Islands a reputation for the protecting its islands from speculative tourism development.

More recently, the island of Ulva in the Hebridean archipelago off north-west of Scotland has been claimed by the inhabitants as a ‘community island’. In 2017 the owner of island, Jamie Howard, whose family had owned Ulva for 70 years, decided to put it on the market for offers over £4.25m. The six remaining inhabitants (2 of them primary school children)¹² were concerned that a new owner could use the island as a private space and perhaps decide to push out the last few residents. The inhabitants appealed under the Land Reform Act 2003 (UK Government, 2003), which established, for rural and marginal areas (including islands), that if a private owner decides to put a territory up for sale, the local community must first be consulted. Scotland’s new land reform laws give communities the opportunity to try to buy land themselves: therefore, Ulva’s six residents attempted a community buyout, following the examples of other small islands like the islands of Eigg in 1997 and Gigha in 2001¹³. After presenting a social and economic development masterplan to the Scottish Government, the community decided to buy the island with the support of the Scottish Land Fund, the Macquarie Bank Group, a crowd-funding appeal (especially involving the

¹² The island had suffered significant population decline since the mid-19th Century. In 1837 it had a resident population of 604 people living in 16 villages. By 1889 Ulva’s population had dropped to 53 people. The resident population has fluctuated over recent decades, increasing from 13 in 1981 to 30 in 1991 before declining to 16 residents in 2001 and 11 residents in 2011 (data from interview with Wendy Reid, Ulva development Manager, August 10th 2020).

¹³ For more information about the Islands of Eigg and Gigha, visit the Eigg website.

descendants of emigrants who had left the island in the 19th Century) and a local fundraising. Ulva passed into community ownership using the provisions of Scotland's Community Right to Buy legislation. In these above-mentioned cases we can read the expression of a desire or a need for islands as public, free spaces, counterbalancing the wish to own (or enjoy for a holiday) a private island, which promotes luxury real estate worldwide¹⁴.

The need for 'open islands', moreover, finds confirmation in the success of CPH-Ø1, a public artificial floating island in Copenhagen created in 2018 by the Australian architect Marshall Blecher with the Danish design studio Fokstrot. The success of this prototype, anchored in the city harbour, led to the design of "a new type of public space in the heart of Copenhagen - a 'parkipelago' of floating islands" (Inhabitat, 2020). The islands, designed as a mobile cluster (which can also be converted into one super-island) host endemic plants, provide habitat for wildlife and can be used for various activities such as urban swimming, fishing, picnics, gardening, hosting temporary sail-in cafés and so on.

In different places and in different ways, islands have become effective instruments and metaphors for freedom, civic self-determination or the right to live in a fulfilling public space, and have provided ductile and multi-purpose amphibious spaces. In this way, the destiny of an island can become pivotal with regard to land-use choices and territorial visions for a local community. Unlike the purchase of a private island, which tends to involve geographically spread actors (sellers, buyers and real estate agents), the right to the island as a public space is usually lived, claimed or conquered from a local or nissological matrix (Depraetere, 1991; McCall, 1994). Even when they concern non populated islands or are embedded in visionary urban planning projects, such claims can be considered an expression of islands "on their own terms" (Baldacchino, 2008: 37). 'Right to the island' campaigns have become successful narratives, circulating globally and able to raise interest and solidarity from people from all over the world. Cabrera and Sa Dragonera are well known as reference examples for environmental activists in Mediterranean; the island of Ulva was the subject of an event at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition (Architecture & Design Scotland, 2018); and Poveglia per Tutti has members from the USA, Australia and Japan and has been the subject of a considerable number of articles in international newspapers¹⁵, as well as on many websites worldwide.

The *Poveglia per Tutti* experience

The story of the Poveglia per Tutti association starts in a bar on Giudecca Island. It was March 2014 when the owner, Andrea Barina, with some local friends and customers provocatively asked: "Why don't we buy the island?". But let us take a step backwards for a moment. Why would a group of citizens, while having an aperitif, start thinking of buying Poveglia island? The island was (and still is, for the moment) public. It looks a little bit contradictory.

In December 2013 the Italian Minister for Cultural Heritage and Activities, following a policy of selling state properties in an effort to ameliorate the national debt, gave the Italian State Property Office, the managing authority of Poveglia Island, approval to put the island up for lease. In March 2014 the Office announced that Poveglia would be offered on a 99-year lease

¹⁴ See, for example: <https://www.privateislandsonline.com/> or https://www.sothebysrealty.com/eng/sales/int/private-island-type/gallery-view?gclid=CjwKCAjwmrn5BRB2EiwAZgLG9oiybzv3Zd9Gi6UVW8acGYEgPCfqIj_SisxL7PnGndoUlnq5PLResXhoCzflQAvD_BwE&gclid=aw.ds

¹⁵ See, for example, Davies (2014), Ordaz (2014) and Ridet (2014).

at an online auction, along with other historic properties in Italy (Semi, 2015). It is relevant to note that a 99-year lease is quite different from a permanent transfer to a private third party, as in the case of some of the previously cited examples. Despite this, the reduction of free use due to this form of long-term concession would have affected both the everyday practices of local communities and the status of Poveglia in their mental maps and the space of their collective memories. Indeed, Poveglia was one of the last small islands used by Venetians as a public space and this fact can be understood as the main trigger for the adverse local reaction. It is notable that this kind of reaction did not occur in opposition to privatisation processes occurring in other islands, such as Ca' Roman and San Secondo in 2018. One of the reasons for the apparent social silence on the latter could be the fact that many of social actors who might have been willing to organise a reaction continue to be committed to the still unresolved Poveglia affair.

From the beginning the island became not just a concrete and material space but a symbolic one, invested with other meanings related to the right to the city, the commons and the fight against the neoliberal touristic vortex affecting Venice and its Lagoon (Cavallo, 2016). When news of the proposed auction appeared in the local newspapers the reaction of a group of citizens was to form an association. In the newly formed association's perspective, the island was a threatened common and, possibly, the next island to become a private touristic space. The association asked interested individuals to pay an initial sum of €99 each, in order to participate in the public auction, proposing their own claim to the island as a place for the whole community to visit and enjoy (Brusarosco, 2019). Poveglia became an example of community participation and response by citizens to the inadequacy of the institutions in managing public assets, as affirmed in an interview with one of the members, Giancarlo Ghigi: "One of the important points for me is that it is not a question of buying something [ie Poveglia] that belongs to everyone but revealing with this simple crowdfunding that the leasing of the state properties are sales without a project." The "real difficulty" - he added - "is to work to define a public, community-driven project while acknowledging the inability of the institutional 'public' sector to play a driving role. The stories about the morasses of the Venetian 'commons' are unfortunately countless" (Ghigi in Martinelli, 2014).

It is interesting to take into consideration the views of the actors involved towards the island. For the non-institutional local actors (some citizens and the members of the association), Poveglia represents a sort of peri-urban informal park that everyone could visit and a place of memories where many Venetians were accustomed to spending time, especially during the summer. They thereby consider it as a free space. For the institutional actors, locally and nationally (municipality and Italian State Property Office), Poveglia means a space in decay, the recovery of which is not affordable (or not considered strategic to finance) for the State or the municipality. As one can see, there is some truth in both perspectives.

The membership of the association grew, and members started to spend time on the island for the purposes of restoration and maintenance. The association organised various demonstrations and social activities on, in front of and around the island, such as the Sagrañomala festival (meaning something like 'Freakfestival'). Its members succeeded in restoring certain parts of the island, clearing overgrown vegetation. By the end of April 2014, 4000 people, not only Venetians but also Italian and foreign and sympathisers, had joined the association, with each member pledging €99 to compete for the lease, collecting months around €500,000¹⁶ in a few months. The internal structure of the association began to have

¹⁶ The membership now costs €19. The initial fee of €99 was decided on in order to collect enough money to take part in the online auction.

a complex form, divided by tasks based on the skills and knowledge of the members, while the participatory approach and management was introduced in its statutes.

Thanks to this active involvement of citizens, the attempted acquisition of the island by local businessman Luigi Brugnaro (now the Mayor of Venice, at its second term) was blocked and the Italian State Property Office definitively retired the auction, declaring Brugnaro's offer of 500.000 euros offer inadequate¹⁷. Poveglia per Tutti worked out a plan to restore and protect Poveglia and, in the meantime, some of the members started a dialogue with the State Property Office in order to present the project and obtain a concession. This overture was however rejected in July 2015, just a couple of months after the election of Luigi Brugnaro and his consequent withdrawal from the purchase attempt. Requests for a concession for the island continued and, in parallel, the association did everything possible to ensure access to the island, to organise two further *Sagranòmala* events and to continue working on and arranging the undeveloped area, with gardening and planting, as well as garbage collection. Poveglia per Tutti's long-term activities, both on the island and at the institutional level, through conversing with public bodies, appeared to reach a breaking point between the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018 when the State Property Office, after the long debate about the possible concession of the island, withdrew its interest in discussing this possibility with the association and then, in February 2018, declared it illegal for the public to set foot on the island. This was a turning point because it became evident that the 'battle' for Poveglia was changing into something that had to do with political and social issues pertaining not just to the island itself but to Venice and its Lagoon more generally. The members of the association began to discuss this possible slippage of interests and in 2018 and 2019 Poveglia per Tutti participated in and organised several meetings, demonstrations and conferences (Figure 3) with the aim of involving other local associations in order to build a network and find common paths to fight battles together.

At the beginning of 2020, the ban on landing on the island had lapsed and, at present, the island is accessible even if only occasionally and with State Property Office's permission¹⁸. Consequently, the association launched a campaign called *risvegli* ('awakenings') with the intention of reinvigorating the activities of restoration, especially after the exceptionally high waters that affected the lagoon in November and December 2019, cleaning the overgrown vegetation in order to hold the *Sagranòmala* festival again. After some days of work between January and early March, the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown caused a halt, frustrating the various projects that the association wanted to implement for 2020. The forced slowdown of the activities imposed by the pandemic, the failure to obtain the management of the island and the long duration of the affair inevitably generated a feeling of frustration and disengagement in some members: even if the mission and its aims had not failed, the association entered a delicate moment in its history.

¹⁷ Even if this was the highest offer, the sum was clearly inadequate when considering the size of the island in the context of the lagoon and the value of its buildings. Drawing a comparison with the islands considered in this work, the attempt to buy the Balearic Sa Dragonera was quantified in 280 million pesetas in 1974 (nearly 1.680.000 euros, nowadays about 22 million euros), while Scottish Ulva was bought in 2017 for 4,6 million pounds (nearly 5,2 million euros currently). Even if such cases are not proper benchmarks because of the incomparable sizes of the three islands (7,25 hectares for Poveglia, 288 for Sa Dragonera and 1990 for Ulva) and the very different real estate reference market, locations and characteristics etc. these sums give an idea of the degree of underestimation of the offer.

¹⁸ The accessibility question has also a practical side. Landing on the island has become increasingly complicated and insecure due to the deterioration of the landing facilities. In the 1th July 2020 assembly the association deliberated the purchase of a new floating pier.



Figure 3 - Posters and flyers related to the major events organised by or with the participation of Poveglia per Tutti (authors' collage).

An island and some people: the processuality of a feasible utopia

Through the various stages of the research process, analysis of secondary data, participant observation and interviews (and, in particular, the last two), five recursive themes emerged giving consistency to the 'right to the island' narrative and practices. In this section we will present and analyse them, distinguishing between one theme/characteristic concerning the Poveglia per Tutti association in its features and functioning and four themes concerning the relationship between the association and the island of Poveglia.

Starting with the themes concerning the association's features and functioning, first of all, we found that the profiles of the founders, and later on of the members of the executive committee, are characterised by a high level of skills and capacity: architects, lawyers, teachers, people who worked or had worked at the higher levels of public administration and in European planning or had other experience of cooperation and participation in the field of associations and organisation of events. The qualities which the members of the directive council recognised as the strong points of the association were the variety of competencies, and the organisational, planning and conflict management abilities. Also seen as valuable were pragmatism and efficiency as shown, for example, in the organisation of events and

symposiums but above all in the management of the common heritage and in dialogue with the State Property Office and other levels of the public administration. In this context it should be noted that the association, by choice, has always stayed within the limits of legality. From the operational viewpoint, the organisation of work groups allowed the association to benefit from the specific inclinations and abilities of those who had made themselves available.¹⁹

All of this meant that Poveglia per Tutti gained the respect and admiration of other associated bodies, which gave it legitimacy and placed it at the head of a network of Venetian associations because. As member Marco Bassi has identified, “at the beginning Poveglia’s role was that of a catalyst of experience and practices, but now it’s right to widen the horizon from the island to other islands, and then to the city and the context of the lagoon” (interview 21st May 2018). This widening of the range of action was the fruit, or consequence, of the association’s interpersonal, fact-finding and organisational skills. On her part, Anna Brusarosco, the current president of the association, believes that Poveglia per Tutti has become a reference point for the other associations because it has always “behaved transparently, clearly and honestly” (interview 30th May 2018). A shift in interest beyond the physical and metaphorical perimeters of the island took place during 2018-2019 when the association began to promote events, meetings, conferences on themes that were tangential or more wide-ranging compared to those which they had debated when occupying Poveglia: common heritage, public spaces and civic use, residency, and the effects of a certain touristic models. Among important events in this regard were the assembly of citizen associations held on 15th February 2018²⁰ and the ‘*L’altro Uso*’ (‘The Other Use’) conference held on the 14th and 15th April of the same year²¹, both of which were dedicated to safeguarding against the sale of the common heritage.²²

As for the specific link between the association and the island of Poveglia, both in its materiality and symbolic meanings, the first feature that clearly emerged has to do with affectivity and relations. Before the birth of Poveglia per Tutti, only a few members of the directive council, in particular those long-term residents of Giudecca, had had a relationship with Poveglia that dated back to childhood in the manner that member Marco Bassi had - “from the 1980s, when I was a boy, it was a place well suited for exploration and spending time out of doors” (interview 21st May 2018). While the island was seen by some as an informal recreation area, for fishing, swimming, or camping, those with longer established linkages saw it as a ‘place of the heart’ where their life-stories were interwoven with memories. Others still, had only heard of it generically and did not even know exactly where it lay in the lagoon. One of those, for example, stated, “for me Poveglia meant nothing from a biographical or affective viewpoint” (Lorenzo Pesola, interview 30th May 2018).

All the same, through the association’s first actions, involving a stay on the island, many others confirmed that they had developed a sentimental bond with the place and, at the same

¹⁹ These points were elaborated in an interview with Lorenzo Pesola, former President of the association (incumbent from the beginning to 2019) undertaken by the authors on 30th May 2018.

²⁰ In addition to Poveglia per Tutti, other participating organisations were: Italia Nostra, Venessia.com, Comitato Ambientalista Altro Lido, Comitato S. Anna, Gruppo 25 Aprile, Generazione 90, Comitato Gasometri and Venezia Cambia.

²¹ The conference involved researchers, activists, and representatives of associations from all over Italy, with the aim of sharing information, practices and tactics.

²² It should be noted that the then president of Poveglia per Tutti, Lorenzo Pesola, stated that he was worried “because the widening of the horizon towards the city risks losing Poveglia per Tutti’s innovative approach to civil causes” (interview 30th May 2018).

time, with the other members of the association, and, thereby, a “bond between community and island” (Sandro Caparelli, interview 30th May 2018). Similarly, for Anna Brusarosco, Poveglia per Tutti is “a family and a community... from having lived on the island together relationships were born, which then also led to further experiences.”²³ Besides affectivity and relations another strong theme refers to the dimension of Nature. The abandonment of the island, with the consequent renaturalisation, which we wrote of in our first article dedicated to Poveglia (Cavallo and Visentin, 2020), acted as a specific driver for the members of Poveglia per Tutti. Not only because the abandonment calls for a new civic and public use, avoiding the road of touristic privatisation, but also because it is the abandonment itself that renders this terraqueous corner of the lagoon attractive. In the words of Sandro Caparelli, coordinator of the technical group responsible for the project planning, “Poveglia is a wild corner in a place [ie Venice] where, by contrast, everything is planned and covered by stone”; for this very reason it has been possible to “support nature” (ibid) in the planning proposals carried out.

Despite the above, the major theme that aggregates and characterises the association, is the idea of the island as a “feasible utopia,” consistent with the principles of “social auto-planification” (Friedman, 2000). An element clearly emerging from the interviews and participant observation is the utopic tension with which the island has been invested. We were told that from the first moments of the association’s life both the atmosphere inspiring the participants and the image of the island itself (associated with the deeply rooted cultural tradition of island utopia) contributed to the perception of a “realisable utopia... more, it is a place on which further utopias can be projected” (interview Sandro Caparelli, 30th May 2018); or “a possible utopia” (Anna Brusarosco, interview 30th May 2018) or, again, “a concrete utopia” (ibid). Unlike the Thomas More’s Utopia (1516), governed and predetermined in all its aspects, Poveglia has been conceived as the seat of an open and procedural utopia. For this reason, a good part of the association’s initial work has been in bringing to light all the needs, desires, and possible projects, excluding no one (thanks to the island being sufficiently large and varied internally to lend itself potentially to more uses). Indeed, a large meeting held on 2nd June 2014²⁴ (and also subsequent meetings) was dedicated to gathering ideas, needs and proposals.

When we asked the interviewees what their vision was for the future of the island, the dimension of ‘poly-functionality’ was emphasised (interview with Lorenzo Pesola, interview 30th May 2018) but also we were told: “open, living, free and many-faceted... consistent with the utopia which it represents” and with “people who come and go and people who stay there permanently” (interview, Sandro Caparelli, 30 May 2018), or “a living island, to which people go together. Certainly, the restoration of the buildings is important, but above all the people who live there and respect it” (interview with Anna Brusarosco, 30th May 2018). On the other side, the failure to obtain the State Property Office’s support has, in itself, favoured an absence of definitive planning, to the point of encouraging the affirmation that this is “a process and not a project” (Sandro Caparelli, interview 30th May 2018), or even that the association was in a certain way “obsessed by the process” (Lorenzo Pesola, interview 30th May 2018). The informal use by association members of the term *Poveglianti* – a gerund, a

²³ One of these further experiences is the Coro delle Lamentele di Venezia (Choir of Venetian Complaints), an informal and ironic choral group based on the model of the analogous experience in Helsinki with the aim of singing about what is not working in the city - it goes without saying that one of the cornerstones of the Venetian choir is the excess of tourism (cf. Bruttomesso, 2020).

²⁴ Held at the Venetian Arsenale and entitled, ‘The island that will be. How can the public, sustainable and participatory future of Poveglia be realised?’.

verbal processual form to be exact – to define themselves seems to confirm this approach. The strong protection of the horizontality and opening of the participatory process was perhaps the true (realised) utopia of Poveglia per Tutti.

A further aspect is directly linked to the theme of the processual utopia: the idea of a (re)inhabited island. Actually, even in the open and many-faceted planning of proposals and projects that range from a public park to a space for ecological neighbourhood horticulture, to an amphitheatre for concerts and events, and to a hospitality management alternative to the prevalent touristic model in the lagoon, one element stands out which seems to constitute the pivotal point of the association's plural vision of the future Poveglia: the fact that the island could return, in a new form, to be permanently inhabited. There are those who recommend Poveglia as “a new buoyant... anthropological model of a new habitation on water, with innovations in the energy and waste management fields’ (Lorenzo Pesola, interview 30th May 2018). In the assembly of 12th July 2020 this concept was relaunched in the terms of a “fluid habitation possibility”.

In a context where mass tourism, which qualitatively and quantitatively far exceeds the capacity to support it (Canestrelli and Costa, 1991; Van der Borg, Costa and Gotti, 1996; Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019), has expropriated from the citizens the necessary minimums for an acceptable standard of life and has relegated the water to a scenographic element, the Venetians who resist the prospect of transferring to the mainland are falling back upon the peripheries of an aquapelago balanced between abandonment and new planning. The island has also become a symbol: “thanks to our work, it [ie the lagoon and its islands] is a piece of the territory and to remove Poveglia from the citizens means renouncing a part of that” (Patrizia Veclani, interview 23rd May 2018). The ‘microland’ of Poveglia, on the edge but, at the same time, part of a system of islands in a watery space, becomes imagined as “a place of collective well-being, an expression of the city and its citizens and their willingness to construct in mutual cooperation a new model of community and quality of life in public spaces” (ibid). If it is true that “one cannot live as a passer-by and not as a citizen in one’s own city” (Anna Brusarosco, interview 30th May 2018), then Poveglia, with its possible future inhabitants, becomes the symbol not only of the non-touristic recovery of an abandoned island, but a possible re-inhabiting of Venice as a city of water.

Conclusion

In both our previous article (Cavallo and Visentin, 2020) and with the present one, we aim at showing how the island of Poveglia epitomises the dichotomous characteristic and hybridity that pertain to small islands (Depraetere, 1991; Baldacchino [ed], 2007): land and water, past and future, lived and imagined, outside and inside, inhabited and abandoned, history and story, heritage and wilderness, private and public, vulnerability and resilience. Furthermore, Poveglia reflects the tensions, polarised values and scales of the complicated socio-relations between local and global, between ‘Cosmos’ and ‘Hearth’ (Tuan, 1996), embodying a peculiar outpost of globalisation (Ratter, 2017). At a global level the tension swings between the ‘ghost island’ of the worldwide community of paranormal believers (Cavallo and Visentin, 2020) and the exclusive resort island sought by the transnational capital; while at the local level the fishing-bathing-picnicking island of yesteryear has, thanks to the actions of the Poveglia per Tutti Association, been socially enriched with the vision of a contemporary ‘public space island’, giving a shape (and a place) to the sensibility of many people well beyond the Venetian dimension.

The progressive touristification of the globe that has been quali-quantitatively exacerbated in the last decades, is inexorably expanding the processes of spectacularisation, theming and consumption of Venice's historical city centre and lagoon spaces, with the corollary of depopulation and gentrification reinforced by neoliberal politics (Sassen, 2002; Semi, 2015; China, 2016; Minoia, 2017; Salerno, 2018; Visentin and Bertocchi, 2019). In such a picture, Poveglia has become a symbol of civic resistance and right to public space, not only for the Venetians. Our interviewees declared, "It is a matter of projecting there [ie in Poveglia] what one would like for Venice" (Sandro Caparelli, interview 30th May 2018); "defending Poveglia, a small island, to defend all the Venetian Lagoon system" (Marco Bassi, interview 21st May 2018); or, again: "I care about Poveglia, but I care more about Venice. Poveglia has been a good excuse to return to taking care of the city again" (Andrea Barina, interview 4th June 2018).

From an operational perspective, the Poveglia issue is at a standstill. After the association's first attempt to participate in the online auction, the island remains in limbo. On the one hand, the pandemic restricts the association's projects to informal activities directed to the building-free section of the island. On the other hand, the Italian State Property Office, after the first auction, has not presented any new call for bids, although, according to the Valore Paese-Fari project, it is still looking for entrepreneurs - not citizens - willing to invest millions of euros to renovate the buildings on the island. Indeed, collaboration options between a private investor, local and/or national government and the Poveglia per Tutti association have not been considered, nor did association's patrons spontaneously come forward.²⁵

To conclude, the relevance of islandness (and smallness) in all the Poveglia affair is significant. Firstly, it enhanced the visibility and the recognisability of this space and, secondly, it fostered the innovative conceptualisations and actions that the association has experimented with. In the words of the President of the association, Anna Brusarosco, interviewed on 30th May 2018: "Poveglia is the island of an island [ie Venice]; it is a dot on the map, easy to recognise. Islandness worked in our favour, together with the visibility of Venice." In this way, Poveglia has aroused global interest as an epitome of a civic utopia. It has been also looked at – mainly by activists and grassroots movements – as a "laboratory" or a "showcase" (Ratter, 2017) of certain territorialisation processes dealing with active citizenship, resistance to tourist monoculture and the usability of public space. Above all, we propose this island be considered as a metaphorical disposition (Dematteis, 1996) for understanding the Venetian context. More precisely Poveglia becomes a synecdoche, in the geographical sense used by Debarbieux (1995: 98)²⁶, for the whole aquapelagic territory of the Venetian Lagoon and for the glocal dynamics it lives. Not by chance one of our

²⁵ While we were completing the last draft of the article, at the end of October 2020, the Five Star Movement senator Orietta Vanin proposed an amendment (10.o.1) to the Salvamare ('Save the sea') national law that sought to establish the inalienability of the minor islands of the Venetian Lagoon, including Poveglia (Senato della Repubblica, 2021). See article 11 bis (page 70), in particular, "The minor island of Poveglia is inalienable. Its management is entrusted to the Ministry for Environment, Land and Sea Protection for its own institutional uses and as the seat of its offices and institutes".

²⁶ Debarbieux writes "the evocation of a territory by one of its constituting places presents a great analogy with a synecdoche... an analogy between synecdoche and symbolic relationship between place and territory; the latter relies on the existence of territorial meanings in places that are, at first glance, simple elements of this comprising entity" (1995: 98).

interviewees declared verbatim, “Poveglia is a synecdoche of Venice” (Sandro Caparelli, 30 May 2018).

Between the three modalities in which the territorialising synecdoche operates, originally proposed by Debarbieux (ibid) and more recently applied to islands by Bernardie-Tahir (2011) and Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll (2014), the one that best suits the case of Poveglia is the “place of condensations” modality. Places of condensation are used by a social collective to speak about itself, to tell its history and anchor its values, being “the frames of individual and collective experiences that awake a reference to a social collective and to its territory” (Debarbieux, 1995: 100). Moreover, as the case of Poveglia shows, islands of condensation also “provide the opportunity to read and analyse different expression of globalisation” (Bernardie-Tahir, 2011: 296), even if in a remote corner of the Venetian Lagoon.

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