

From Disappearance to Rebirth Politics and Business in Mantua Between 1630 and 1650

Alberto Grandi
University of Parma

Until 1630, the population of Mantua was about 30,000 inhabitants and its economy was really sturdy, thanks to agriculture and some manufacturing activities. The war and its overwhelming effects were added to the ones of the humongous plague epidemic. In 1631, the city counted less than 7,000 inhabitants and each economic activity was absent. Thus the new dukedom's government tried to boost both the population and the economic growth by guaranteeing tax exemptions for those people who chose to move to Mantua. This paper analyzes the stories of these entrepreneurs, who took advantage of the incentives, making private negotiations with the new government. The outcome was kind of surprising because the demographic growth was really fast, in 1640 already, the city was back to 25,000 inhabitants, but mostly the economic recovery was focused on new areas, such as stockings and caps factories and paper industry. The Plague and the war erased a city but a new one arose in its place, followed by a new ruling class and new economic basis.

Keywords: early modern, plague, guilds, Mantua, Thirty Years War

INTRODUCTION

Mantua at the beginning of the seventeenth century, was the capital of a small state in northern Italy. Its population was around 30,000 inhabitants and its economy was extremely solid, thanks to highly developed agriculture and a modern manufacturing activity focused on wool processing and leather tanning.

In 1627, due to dynastic issues of the ruling family, the Gonzagas, the “War of the Succession of Mantua” began, the devastating effects of which were added to those of the great plague epidemic of 1630. The war ended and the epidemic passed, in the spring in 1631, the city no longer existed: the inhabitants were less than 7,000 and all economic activity had practically disappeared. Therefore, the new government of the duchy tried to encourage demographic and economic recovery, guaranteeing tax exemptions to those who decided to come and live in Mantua and those who were starting a new entrepreneurial activity.

This paper analyzes the stories of these entrepreneurs who took advantage of the incentives, also opening private negotiations with the new ruling house, the Gonzaga-Nevers, to obtain further advantages. The result was in some ways surprising because, after a slow start, the demographic recovery was very fast, already in 1645, the city had returned to about 25,000 inhabitants, but above all the economic revival took place in completely new sectors, such as processing of knitted socks and caps and paper production. The plague and the war wiped out a city, but in its place a new one arose, with a new ruling class and with new social and economic foundations. Unfortunately, the recovery, in the medium term, proved less solid than

expected because it was too tied to tax incentives, but some new companies that arose in this period continued to play a driving role for the local economy.

“THE NAVAL OF LOMBARDY” MANTUA FROM 1550 TO 1630

During the lordship of Federico II Gonzaga (1500-1540), Mantua acquired the characteristics of a great European city. With about 30,000 inhabitants, in demographic terms, it was among the top ten Italian cities and among the top twenty in Europe (De Vries, 1984, pp. 269-275). These dimensions remained substantially stable until the plague of 1630. But in addition to the size of the population, the continuous requests for goods and services by an increasingly large court and the policy of exemptions and privileges were implemented in favor of certain economic activities. The result was substantially continuous economic growth for about a century and a half with craftsmanship and manufacturing also driving the rapidly changing agricultural sector. In particular, the art of wool experienced a continuous expansion thanks to important production changes; the Mantuan manufacturing, in fact, increasingly turned towards the production of so-called “low cloths”, abandoning the production of “high cloths”, but above all by starting a profitable rural proto-industry specializing in the manufacture of hats, gloves, shirts and socks (De Maddalena, 1962, pp. 608-653). The art of silk also experienced strong growth, thanks to the incentives offered by the Gonzaga court to operators willing to transfer their activities to the Mantua area.

This liveliness in the secondary sector was added to the historical agricultural vocation of the territory, which allowed the Duchy of Mantua to export huge quantities of wheat every year and feed a continuous influx of precious metals into the local economic system. Consequently, financial activity was also particularly developed, with the large Jewish community managing an efficient network of generation banks (Simonsohn, 1977, pp. 123-132). This favorable condition was looked upon with great interest by all the Italian states, to the point of pushing the Venetian ambassador to define the Duchy of Mantua as “the navel of Lombardy.”¹

The long growth phase began to show the first signs of a slowdown already in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. The first epidemic of plague in 1575-76 and the famine of 1590-92 effectively reversed the trend. But until the dramatic events that involved the ruling house with the succession of Duke Vincenzo II, who died in 1627, the Mantuan economy, which had certainly worsened, still remained solid, thanks to the wool sector and highly efficient agriculture.

THE WAR AND THE PLAGUE

The first sign of “malignant fever” was reported on November 2, 1629. The libri mortuorum indicate that from an average of 100-180 monthly deaths recorded in normal periods, Mantua counted 1,176 in January 1630, 1,088 in February, 1,100 in March, 2,243 in April, 3,978 in May, 4,800 in June. In about five months, Mantua would have lost 40% of its population (D’Arco, 1839, p.69).

But this tragedy was very little compared to what would soon befall the city and the entire duchy. In December 1627, at the point of death, Duke Vincenzo II, having no descendants, appointed his heir Charles of Rethel, son of Ludovico Gonzaga-Nevers, a French cadet branch. The reaction of Emperor Ferdinand II was vehement, unable to accept that a French dynasty would settle in Monferrato and in the Duchy of Mantua. Thus began the war of succession of Mantua and Monferrato. The imperial troops of Albrecht von Wallenstein in September 1629 besieged Mantua, which resisted the attack and forced the imperials to retreat in March 1630. But in June 1630, the second offensive against Mantua began with the siege of the troops under the command of Mattia Galasso and Johann von Aldringen. Also this time the resistance was particularly strong. In the night between 17 and 18 July, however, a department of Rodolfo di Colloredo managed to enter the city. At that point, the Duke of Mantua and his family were forced to leave the city. At the same time, the Gonzaga palace, Palazzo Ducale, was surrounded and stripped of all the artistic treasures the dynasty had accumulated over time. Most citizens were tortured and killed, and fire was set everywhere. The Jews were looted of their pawn shops and there was a second wave of plague (Amadei, 1954, pp. 539-543).

The imperial troops abandoned the city only in April 1631. At that point, Mantua had fewer than 7,000 inhabitants and all economic activity had effectively disappeared. In May of that same year, after the signing of the Cherasco treaty, Mantua was returned to the Gonzagas, Duke Charles I found himself reigning over a ghost town. No less heavy was the tax paid by the countryside. The loss of human life reached 85% in the areas crossed by the imperial army, with an average that stood at around 50%. This fact alone explains the slowness with which the city recovered from the demographic crisis of that terrible two-year period. In fact, the demographic basins on which Mantua exerted its attraction could not produce a surplus of population such as to feed a migratory flow towards the city. The other urban centers of the Po area were competitive migratory attraction poles, which, despite having been hit hard by the plague, did not suffer the devastation of the siege, looting and military contributions. The Mantuan economy was destroyed by these events, to which, as an aggravating circumstance, was added the expulsion of the Jewish community, which, as we have seen, in the period before 1630 represented one of the fundamental components of the city's economic life. The result was that for all the 1630s Mantua, despite the exemptions offered by the ducal administration, was not an attractive destination for potential immigrants (Belfanti, 1994, p.37).

It, therefore, became clear to the returning Duke Charles I that the measures implemented up to that moment were incapable of guaranteeing a normal recovery of economic life; stronger and in some ways, even more innovative tools were needed. As we will see in the next chapter, the new, largely French-speaking government lacked neither courage nor imagination.

THE RECOVERY POLICIES

Mantua, therefore, had encountered significant difficulties in replacing the population eroded by the war and the epidemic, presenting itself unattractive for those who did not have the means and the necessary knowledge to take advantage of the needs of the ruling family and a court who returned to occupy a building ducal stripped of its most precious treasures. Even the dispersion of the assets of extinct families or forced by necessity to alienate their assets could offer new investment opportunities for those who had the necessary knowledge to take advantage of them, as well as the services required by a small elite of the newly rich. But until 1640, the signs are very timid. The demographic recovery is slow: still, ten years after the epidemic's end, Mantua does not reach 15,000 inhabitants.

From 1641, a completely new economic and demographic policy was launched, which we can certainly define as mercantilistic, but which were characterized by an absolutely original flexibility and pragmatism. The first example of this new attraction policy concerned the restoration of the already existing paper factory on the outskirts of the city known as "del Maglio"; this factory was built in 1542 by a group of cap makers who were part of the Wool Guild, which, as we have seen, was by far the richest and most powerful in the city. After the war and the plague, the factory had effectively fallen into disuse, and the ducal government opened a private negotiation with some foreign operators to try to put it back into operation. In 1641 the entrepreneurs who undertook to reactivate the paper mill obtained the right for the supply of paper to the city and its domains, but above all, the monopoly of "rags, paper and garavelle"², for which they became de facto monopolists in the paper sector and in the commodity market connected to it. This new contract changed all the balances consolidated up to that moment. Until 1641, the paper market in Mantua was characterized by a plurality of subjects engaged in production and sale, while there were some bottlenecks in the supply of rags as an indispensable raw material for production. Suppose at least two operators appeared on the final market. In that case, the conductor of the Maglio paper mill and a company of publishers and printers led by Giacomo Ruffinelli, as regards the collection and sale of rags, the ducal government had guaranteed the patent rights to a certain Cesare. from Rovigo already at the end of the 16th century.

This system, that we could define as asymmetrical (monopoly upstream, competition downstream), as mentioned, ended in 1641 when the Maglio paper mill obtained control over the entire supply chain. And here is a first interesting fact from a technical and economic point of view the entrepreneur who obtained the management of the Maglio paper mill was a certain Angelo da Fano, who brought to Mantua not only a substantial endowment in terms of capital but also the know-how in the production of paper that from

Fabriano, during the Late Middle Ages and the early Modern Age, had spread throughout the Marche and therefore also in Fano. The new management, therefore, was chosen not only for economic reasons but also for obvious technical reasons, intending to bring skills not present in the area to Mantua.

Another extremely interesting case of private negotiations between individual entrepreneurs and the city government is already encountered in the following year, 1642, when two Vicentine artisans ask for the right to produce soap in Mantua, ensuring that they can supply the city with a product completely identical to the Venetian one, but obviously asking for the announcement of “all the savoni of Venetia and the other parts that it is usual to sell in Mantua”³. The ducal government granted the right to the two artisans and ordered a ban on the importation of soap, in June 1642⁴. There does not seem to be any opposition from the textile corporations, even if the risk of a price increase under a monopoly regime was more than concrete, as well as the possibility that the soap produced in Mantua was qualitatively inferior to the Venetian one. Already the following year, however, the wool corporation sent a memorandum to the Chamber Magistrate asking for the ban on Venetian soaps to be lifted because:

“li savoni tanto negri che bianchi, che si fabbricano in Mantova son troppo dolci e risultano inefficaci, con troppa terra, non spurgano e si sfanno in acqua dopo poco”⁵

Probably, the soap producers of Mantua limited themselves to buying the product in Venice and then adding clay and other cheaper ingredients to it to increase its weight, thus increasing profits, also exploiting the monopoly regime in which they operated. Unfortunately, we have no other news on this entrepreneurial initiative, subsequent sources no longer mention it and we do not know what happened to the request of the woolen workers.

The uncertain outcome of the new soap factory is not very different from what happened a few years later with the attempt to build a large silk spinning wheel on the banks of the Mincio River. The idea of the city government was to process all the raw silk produced in the Mantuan countryside in the city, making the most of a local raw material. Also in this case, the ancient prohibitions on the export of silkworms were restored and therefore the farmers who raised them in their homes were forced to sell the product to that single operator. This enterprise, started by a group of Jewish investors from Venice, started with the best of wishes and was initially able to employ a few dozen workers. After about twenty years, the spinning wheel failed in 1671, probably due to the limited local market.

The fate of knitwear was different, but it recovered quickly thanks to the movement of most of the capital and production processes to the countryside. What was being built was in fact a real putting-out system that made use of rural labor and, therefore at a lower cost. Starting from 1643, various merchants from the Venetian territories or from countries of the duchy began to ask for special conditions to set up their shops in Mantua, obtaining complete tax exemptions for ten or even fifteen years⁶. The result was the city’s almost complete deindustrialization and the production cycle’s dispersion in a myriad of peasant houses. In any case, the production of socks, caps and sweaters remained the only manufacturing activity in the Duchy of Mantua for over a century.

Simultaneously with these transformations in the secondary sector, the primary sector further accentuated those characteristics that were already present in the period preceding the plague. Land ownership was concentrated in even fewer hands, with the affirmation of a new nobility that was increasingly overbearing and prone to abuse. The exploitation of the rural population reached very high levels and all this, of course, benefited the land rent and made it possible to keep the export levels of wheat and rice intact. As mentioned, the protagonists of this new feudalism were above all the families recently ennobled by the ruling house, which, in need of new entrances, bestowed titles and heraldic coats of arms with penis hands, without looking too much for the subtle.

A NEW CITY

This last aspect is central to describing the evolution of Mantua and its territory in the period following the plague and the war. From a manufacturing city and financial center of some importance, Mantua was transformed into a large rural village, almost entirely devoid of a dynamic business class, as it had been in the past. The new ruling class comprised only large landowners and the only form of wealth within the Duchy derived from the land.

The resumption of some industrial activities after 1640 thanks to strong public incentives, managed to give good results in the short term. Mantua returned to count about 25,000 inhabitants as early as 1645; but after this brief flare-up, much of these entrepreneurial experiences ended up running out within a decade. The paper industry survived and to a certain extent the knitwear scattered in the homes of the peasants. These socio-economic characteristics did not change until industrialization in the second half of the twentieth century. In practice, the history of Mantua is split in two: there is a city that grew and evolved from the Middle Ages to 1630, and there is another, born in that same year, which has the same name and occupies the same geographical space, but it is completely different. Attempts to resume the thread of a development interrupted by the plague through direct interventions supporting the economy, were ephemeral. With the fall of the Gonzaga-Nevers, they were completely abandoned.

ENDNOTES

1. Archivio di Stato di Mantova (ASMn), Archvio Gonzaga (A.G.), b. 3141. *Disposizioni contrarie alla disposizione d'inibire l'introduzione in questa città de drupi forestieri*
2. ASMn, *Gridario Bastia*, T.11, F.63.
3. ASMn, *Camera di commercio*, b. 12, f. 55
4. ASMn, *Gridario Bastia*, b. 17, f. 98, *Bando sopra li saponi*.
5. ASMn, *Camera di commercio*, b. 3, f. 67. "The soaps, both black and white, which are manufactured in Mantua are too sweet and are ineffective, with too much soil, they do not drain and fall apart in the water after a while"
6. ASMn, AG, b. 3234.

REFERENCES

- Amadei, F. (1954). *Cronaca universale della città di Mantova*. Mantova.
- Belfanti, C.M. (1994). *Mestieri e forestieri*. Milano.
- D'Arco, C. (1839). *Studi statistici sulla popolazione di Mantova*. Mantova.
- De Maddalena, A. (1962). *L'industria tessile a Mantova nel '500 e all'inizio del '600*, in *Studi in onore di Amintore Fanfani*. Milano.
- De Vries, J. (1984). *European Urbanisation (1500–1800)*. London.
- Simonsohn, S. (1977). *History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua*. Jerusalem.