Preface

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Is Venice dying? The prevailing narrative around the present and future of the city is that of an inevitable decline. The authors of the collective volume *Venice Is Not Dying* challenge this narrative, arguing instead that Venice is undergoing a profound crisis, in which complex challenges – ranging from depopulation and overtourism to environmental risks – coexist with areas of resilience and potential revitalization.

The first chapter, by Maurizio Busacca, establishes the scope of the crisis, noting that while cities traditionally die through attack, conquest, or loss of memory (Settis 2014), Venice is currently facing a convergence of these destructive forces alongside the additional threat from climate change and subsequent rising sea levels. At the same time, Venice is endowed with key resources and shows potential for rebirth across economic, social, and physical dimensions. Noteworthy, the elements of this critical puzzle act as both a primary resource and a dominant constraint, as in the paradigmatic case of the development of the tourism sector. This dominance absorbs political and economic resources, fostering low-value-added sectors

characterized by precarious and poorly compensated employment, which in turn leads to social and spatial segregation.

Eleonora Girotti, in chapter 2, provides a reading of the crisis in terms of Nancy Fraser's (2022) Cannibal Capitalism framework: the insatiable need for profit and expansion devours the very extra-economic background conditions it relies on to exist, such as the city's identity and history, the work of care, nature, and political participation.

After displaying the extension, complexity and depth of the crises, the book also searches for possibilities to counter these destructive forces in daily-life, and in economic and political forms of resistance. First, signs of vitality are found in micro daily practices as shown in the third chapter. Here, Beatrice Gervasi, by digging into the everyday life of a venetian neighbourhood, looks for spatial and social counter-trends to the pressures of the multiple crises to find the persistence of a local community fuelled by dense interactions and rituals. Second, the research shows the vitality of "alternative" economic structures which work as "counter movements" in a polanyian sense, as shown in chapter 4, by Emma Maria Rossi: social cooperatives balancing market sustainability with a core mission of social inclusion and rehabilitation. Third, traces of resistance are found in grass-roots social and political participation, either directed to specific or transversal and aimed at resisting commodification and reclaiming the city by proposing economic diversification, public welfare, an ecological vision, democratic autonomy and participation as ways out (chapter 2). These seem to exist and thrive not by directly challenging the titan of mass tourism on its own terms (scale, speed, profit), but by cultivating high-density, relational environments which the forces of commercialization find difficult to penetrate or commodify without destroying the very resource they seek to exploit.

Against this background, it is clear that determining whether Venice is dying or not is not straightforward. Much depends on the extent to which the niches and forms or micro resistance highlighted in the book are able to expand, acquire critical mass, find representation, foster systemic change and institutionalize. Adding to the complexities illustrated in the volume, it is important to acknowledge that Venice's crises (as well as leverage for change) do not pertain to the city exclusively. Venice is unique, but it is not an anomaly. Other historical and cultural cities experience overtourism or the effects of climate change, in Italy and elsewhere. Depopulation and the expulsion of lower-middle classes from city centres is not specific to Venice. The city is rather an exceptional location where several problems (and resources) converge and, above all, where broader structural issues characterizing Italian society, policy and politics are amplified and made evident. Demographic decline, difficult transitions to adulthood, gender and social inequalities,

accessibility to and quality of housing, work, care in the city reflect wider, systemic contradictions, magnified by its specific urban and socio-economic dynamics. This makes the crises deeper and, at the same time, weakens the possibilities for a bottom-up approach able to become systemic. Acknowledging this requires embedding Venice's story in a wider institutional and policy context.

The historical city of Venice and the islands have been losing inhabitants since the aftermath of WWII. If the exodus has become less prominent since the 1980s, the depopulation has been increasingly the results of decreasing birth rates (Favero 2004; 2012). This parallels and highlights more general trends: demographers have shown that Italy's current birth crisis is caused by a combination of two phenomena. On the one hand, women, on average, are having fewer children than desired. At the same time, the low birth rates of the 1980s and 1990s have led to a progressive thinning out of the cohorts of women entering their reproductive years (ages 20-40), structurally reducing the maximum potential pool of births, even if the fertility rate per woman were to slightly increase (Rosina 2021). Also in Venice, the thinning of the very young population is the result of the delay of childbearing choices and of the thinning of the young adult (female) population. If the second factor is structural and cannot be reversed in the short run, the first one resents from a combination of institutional and policy conditions that *can* be influenced. The Italian institutional framework and policies have created a highly segmented labour market that systemically directs young people toward instability, limited career opportunities, and economic vulnerability (Alderotti et al. 2025; Barbieri, Cutuli 2021). At the same time, the welfare system – traditionally oriented to the protection from labour market risks of (typically male, adult, core) workers and neglecting "new" social risks – contributes to the fragilization of the younger generations and of women. According to a prevailing familistic approach, the primary responsibility for care provision (for children, non-self-sufficient elderly, or individuals with disabilities) and the financial support of younger generations falls largely upon families, often being neglected by public policies (Saraceno, Naldini 2013). Beginning in the 1980s, significant demographic shifts (such as population aging and declining mortality rates) and social transformations (including female emancipation and evolving family structures) have subjected the Italian welfare model to intense pressure (Paci 2015). Owing to persistent austerity measures, political processes often showing limited sensitivity to social dynamics, and systemic difficulties stemming from exceedingly complex governance and low administrative efficacy, the system has exhibited notable resistance to reform (Busilacchi, Morlicchio 2024; Da Roit, Sabatinelli 2013; Agostini, Natali 2016; Ranci et al. 2024; Ronchi, Cigna 2024). This institutional inertia has resulted in

a collection of persistent fragilities across the entire country, albeit with regional and local variations which include persistently low (though increasing) female labour market participation, significant challenges for younger cohorts in the transition to independent adulthood; the difficulty in reconciling professional and family life, particularly for working women; and profound inequalities regarding job security and access to social protection (Pace, Raitano 2021; Raitano 2020; Leone, Membretti 2023; Dordoni 2022). These are the general ingredients of the uncertainty of employment and life trajectories among the younger generations, which in Venice are exacerbated by the local (tourist-base) economy and unique urban setting.

A number of vicious circles are therefore at play. The younger generations and particularly women – who could make a difference for the future of Venice (and beyond), demographically, socially, economically – are those who are suffering more from the current situation and, as a consequence, also possess less resources for mobilisation and for boosting structural change – in Venice and beyond.

The hypothesis we can make is that the survival of Venice *needs* the emergence and diffusion of localised and specific forms of resistance and action like the ones spotted by the contributions to this book, but this is unlikely to suffice. A policy effort able to look in a transversal and comprehensive way at life trajectories and urban development embedded in a more favourable work and welfare environment would possibly help.

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