

Andrea Podestà: the role of Baron-Mayor in post-unification Genoa

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Mayor in a time of change

In the second half of the nineteenth century Italian society radically changed: in this country more and more integrated into the rapidly changing world economic system, the passage from a mainly agricultural economy to a society in which industry was becoming more important has its beginnings. The political logic of the Risorgimento is by now at its end leaving space for new social conflicts and ideals that lead up to the “end of the century crisis”. One of the main scenarios for such economic and political processes is Genoa, and in this scenario one of the main characters is Andrea Podestà (fig. 1).

Born in Genoa in 1832, in the commune of San Francesco d'Albaro, to Luca and Luisa Casanova, his Father, an engineer and Colonel of the Engineers Corps in the Napoleonic army and then in the Piedmontese one, well-off (some sources say he was manager of the Mint and owner of a transport company) enough to guarantee the best education for his son. Andrea graduates in law at the University in Genoa in 1854 and enters into the forensic profession. He soon interrupts his judicial career to dedicate himself to public administration. A choice of life that would bring him into the spotlight for several decades. For this reason the almost total lack of information on Podestà's private life is significant: explicable on one hand due to the natural reserve of the person, described by many as “severe” and “sober”, on the other due to a lifestyle very attentive as not to confuse his public image with his private one. We know however, from contemporary witnesses and memories of friends, that the family was extremely important for him. Its ups and downs would give him much joy – the weekly reuniting of

his children, nephews and nieces around him as a real ‘pater familias’ in the Villa at Prà – and pain – the torment that he would always feel following the premature death of one of his daughters.

His political career is rapid: first he becomes counsellor and then Mayor of San Francesco d'Albaro, where he lives in his Father's villa. In 1863 he presents himself at the elections for the Communal Council of Genoa, he is elected and takes on the task of Councillor for Public Works; in 1866 he becomes Mayor and remains thus until the 1873 elections. After this session he guides the commune as senior councillor until October 1874.

The instability of the municipal government brings about a continuous change in the councils. In the political world Podestà moves with agility, from 1882 to 1887 and from 1892 to 1895 he is once again Mayor, he is also a member of the Provincial Council which he presides over from 1870 until his death. In 1867 he is elected Deputy and maintains his seat until 1883, almost without any interruption, when he earns the nomination of Senator of the Kingdom. A demonstration of the friendships he knows how to contrive and of the consideration that he enjoyed in the capital (so close was his relationship with Umberto I that he gave him the title of Baron).

To understand the political dynamics of the second half of the nineteenth century we must remember the limited numbers of the electoral body, even if there was a slow but progressive growth: in 1892 for the local elections, there were 180,000 inhabitants in Genoa, out of 26,400 having the right to vote, only 8,013 took advantage. Therefore the chosen assemblies are the mirror of a limited segment of society

1. 1. Andrea Podestà, Mayor of Genoa from 1866 to 1873



which is more or less equal under the profile of class interests; the working classes are excluded from the electoral battles, the Republicans exclude themselves as they do not want to come to agreements with monarchical institutions. The political factions which confront each other are the Moderate Liberals, the so called historical Left, the more or less open Clericalists: it is difficult to draw clear demarcation lines between these, as the cultural leadership of the “moderate laicism” had a strong influence on all.

Thus the sarcastic judgement of Podestà in 1894 in the Socialist paper “L’era nuova”, described as “fickle, one minute papal yellow, the next ardent republican, the next monarchical tricolour”, does not refer to his controversial side, but to his ability to mediate between opinions which could be reconciled, giving himself a sufficiently wide formation for reference. As a politician, following this widespread procedure, he adapts quickly to the changes in the situations and in the balance of power, directing, as the typical representative of moderate liberalism, coalitions of different tendencies. His first council (1866-1873), siding with the historical Right, manages to unite at the centre some members of the Liberal Left, marginizing the more coherent interpreters of the democracy of the Risorgimento. His second administration (1882-1887) is “transformist” and Agostino Depretis is its reference. In 1887 Podestà resigns: be-

sides a probable intervention by Crispi in Rome, there are other explanations for the motive of his resignation, the discontent aroused amongst the owners of civic debt bonds when it was decided that the interest given back by the Council would be reduced. The accusations of excessive goodwill regarding the “clericals” made by the more lay liberals, perhaps the widespread intolerance for the mayor’s authoritarian style in his management of the Town Hall. As was noted by the French Consul in Genoa in one of his reports, Podestà is too wise to be openly linked politically to the clericals: he intends to put himself forward as the guide of a possible coalition of the different sections of the Moderates.

Confirming the forecast of the diligent diplomat, in 1892 he becomes Mayor for the third time (1892-1895): in fact the elections signal the success of candidates of the ‘Moderata Associazione Costituzionale Liberale, (Association of Constitutional Moderate Liberals), presided by him, and of the ‘Unione elettorale genovese’ (Genoese electoral Union), the political instrument leaning towards Liberal-Catholicism of the Curia ruled by the new Archbishop Tommaso Reggio. First amongst the elected with more than 5000 votes (out of 8013 voters), Podestà assumed the role of Mayor with the vote of the Municipal Council, as foreseen by the new law of 1888, and no longer by King’s appointment. It has been said of his authoritarian style in the management of the Town hall: he controls the actions of the councillors, keeps for himself the compilation of the budget, closely follows the workings of the municipal bureaucracy, whose commitment and retributions are the constant object of Podestà’s attention, prompted by a business-like and paternalist vision of the administrative machine, as they needed to be capable of favouring and promoting efficiently a complex and radical process of transformation of the city, which has in its town planning and public works sectors its most obvious demonstrations.

The Great Urban Transformation

The council ruled by Podestà carries out and plans works that are fitted into the comprehensive picture of urban expansion, which in the second half of the XIX century is pursued by the following administrations, giving signs of continuity.

Picking up from the last directions of the Genoese town planning policy which took shape in the first half of the century, starting from the fifties the new middle class city starts to take shape: the decrees of public utility for the con-

struction of via Assarotti and via Caffaro go back to 1852; in 1859 steps are taken for the urban reordering of the via Palestro, via Goito and Piazza Marsala zone. During the following decades the tendency towards investment in building grows, one of the fields privileged by the aristocracy and the Genoese middle class for the allocation of capital, attracted by the rise in land values and by high possibility of placing the new buildings on the market.

The 1863 “Plan for the enlarging and reordering of the city of Genoa” foresees a large hill thoroughfare, Ring road up river, acting as a crown for the historical centre would link all the recently urbanised zones: from 1865 to the eighties, in successive periods, the tree lined avenues of the Ring road take shape. On the other hand, the 1867 building plan in the Carignano zone, includes the creation of another important way of communication (sea ring road) between the port and the area of Levante.

At the same time interventions are made on the structure of the city centre: in 1869 the construction of Via Roma is initiated (fig. 4), the ideal continuation of via Assarotti (fig. 6) towards the Carlo Felice theatre, followed by the completion of Piazza Corvetto, an authentic central point of the new nineteenth century city (fig.2).

The urbanisation of the Bisagno plain and of the hills immediately to the east of the valley has very important political-administrative implications. The six neighbouring communes of the Levante area (Foce, Marassi, Staglieno, San Fruttuoso, San Francesco d’Albaro, San Martino d’Albaro), in the 1871 census record 30,000 inhabitants over an area of 24 square km, compared with the 130,000 inhabitants of the provincial capital crowded on to an area of 9 square km. The annexation of the communes of the Levante, working together with Genoa already for some time, is vital in order to plan the growth of the city and is authorised by royal decree, starting from the 1st January 1874. So guarantees can be made for “the town planning and broadening of the city from the east side in the flat areas of the suburban areas”, which also receives impulse from the construction of the Brignole railway station and from the enlargement of via Giulia (then via XX Settembre) the plan for which was designed in 1889 and approved in 1890 (fig. 3). All that is missing is the final layout of Piazza De Ferrari, completed at the beginning of the twentieth century with the new seat for the Stock Exchange, providing Genoa with an important commercial and financial centre which took away from Piazza Banchi the role it played in the previous long centuries.

The economic dimension of these urban developments is



2. Piazza Corvetto in Genoa at the end of the XIX century

3. Works for the opening of via Giulia (now via XX Settembre) in Genoa, between the XIX and the XX century



4. Via Carlo Felice (now XXV Aprile) and via Roma at Genoa, in the second half of the XIX century

5. The cover of the link (no longer existing) between palazzo Grimaldi (Tursi) and palazzo Podestà (Lomellino) in Genoa, created by the Mayor Andrea Podestà on the occasion of the visit by Vittorio Emanuele II, his son Umberto and the daughter-in-law Margherita in 1866.

considerable: for the burden that the capital spent on the public works has on the municipal finances, for the total amount of private investments in the building work. Along with the control and the availability of the commune, landowners and building firms are the protagonists of this story; and amongst these, next to the private societies, the building co-operatives can be identified. Beginning their development from the sixties. In the “Società mutua cooperativa per la provvista di viveri e di abitazioni” (The mutual co-operative society for the supply of food and lodgings), founded in 1864, Podestà is amongst the subscribers: this undertaking, along with other similar ones following the model of classic philanthropic societies supported by aristocrats and the middle class, contributes to the realisation of residences for the middle and upper classes.

In the presence of such growth an important aspect is without doubt the infrastructure: the new modern city is provided with “network services”, waterworks and tramways which make up the necessary framework.

The problems of the economy and the entrepreneurial activity

Podestà’s relationship with the economic events needs to be analysed in view of the double role of the Mayor who protects the community’s interests and of the businessman who participates in some of the most important undertakings by the city’s middle class of the time.

The first big problem brought to the attention of the administrator concerns the lack of efficiency of the port. In 1876, intervening in the Chamber, he complains about the lack of improvements in the conditions of the docks in the previous twenty-five years. In December 1875 an agreement is made public in which the Duke of Galliera, Raffaele De Ferrari, a businessman and financier of international status, commits himself to giving the State the outstanding sum of 20 million lire to improve the port; the State and local corporations then add to the donation another 43 million. In this way the major reconstruction works of the port could start, finishing in 1891.

As well as the problem of the improvement of the waterfront and of the length of its wharves, resolved positively at least for the time being, the need for space, warehouses and services for the merchandise has to be satisfied. The fate of the Genoese free port is discussed, whose existence is threatened by a government plan (1866) strongly opposed by the Genoese representatives in the Chamber; the political and parliamentary battle is long: in 1868 Podestà manages to ensure that the free port continues to function until the

completion of the new general warehouses; in 1876 a law establishes that new free warehousing and that of Genoa, in accordance with an 1877 decree, is entrusted to the administration of the local Chamber of Commerce.

Once again thanks to the determination of the municipality the dockyard buildings are adapted for commercial use, up until 1869 the Navy used them as the arsenal. Only in the period during the first and the Second World War would there be other interventions of the same importance on the port in Genoa.

In his role as Mayor, in the economic field Podestà concentrates on the problem of the port, as businessman his interests cover a wider and more varied spectrum.

In 1868 he is amongst the promoters of the “Società di colonizzazione per la Sardegna” (The society for the colonisation of Sardinia), which meets together in Florence in 1869 to boost migration from continental Italy to the island and to favour agricultural development; amongst the shareholders, next to members of the Royal family, are accomplished representatives of the Genoese world of politics and business. Podestà is president of the enterprise, which, however does not go beyond the opening stages. A very different spirit brings about the constitution, still in 1869, of the “Società anonima Miniere di Lanusei” (The Joint Stock Lanusei Mining Company) in Sardinia, he is promoter and shareholder. In 1872 he is amongst the Genoese financiers of the “Società mineralogica di Montesano” (Montesano mineralogical company) and even contributes to the capital of the “Compagnia generale delle Miniere (General Mining Company). Numerous mining companies are formed for the exploitation of the Sardinian mineral resources, and much is the Genoese capital invested in these companies; the share interaction between these companies and Podestà is very complex, present on various boards of directors, he put himself forward as the link between different companies. Correboi, Lanusei, Sarrabus, Monteloro: all important places in Sardinian mining history, for a long time the main centre for the extraction of lead and zinc. The fortunate cycle of the Sardinian mining industry runs out in the last decade of the nineteenth century, with the liquidation of five of the nine companies involving Ligurian capital.

In 1871 Podestà is amongst the founders of the “Compagnia Commerciale Italiana” (Italian Commercial Company), which aims to realise undertakings especially in the maritime sector; the company is closed in 1875, possessed a sugar refinery at Rivarolo which, after years of difficulty, finds new prosperity thanks to the adoption of Customs tariffs



6. Via Assarotti in Genoa at the end of the XIX century

which protect the sugar industry. In 1881, the factory at Rivarolo is bought by the “Società Italiana per la Raffineria di Zuccheri” (Italian Sugar Refinery Society), of which Podestà is President and shareholder; which is then taken over by the Ligure Lombarda, as part of the process of progressive concentration of the sector. In 1890, the Ligure Lombarda has four refineries and a jute factory, amongst its shareholders there are Raggio, Bombrini, Dufour; Podestà is shareholder and administrator, an active one too, so much so that in 1894, when the company shares are in difficulty on the stock exchange, he goes to Paris to make agreements with the big international sugar companies in an attempt to avoid competition that could do damage.

Less positive is the outcome of his participation in the Impresa dell’Esquilino, a company constructing in Rome. The business finds itself in a very difficult situation in 1888 and the attempts by Podestà, shareholder and administrator, to save the company with his own money are in vain.

Finally, we must remember the posts covered by him as counsellor and vice-president of the “Società delle Ferrovie Mediterranee” (Mediterranean Railway Company): he becomes fatally ill in February 1895 when going to Milan for the weekly company board meeting.

The reason for this versatile business life can be individua-

7. A poster on the occasion of the Columbus celebrations, Genoa, November 1892



lised in the constant political dimension of the companies, working in areas (railways, mining, building) which require a relationship with the public administration, and in an investment strategy common to many of the most influential members of the Genoese business world who with Podestà share the risks and the fortunes over the decades.

The culture and the image of the city

Therefore, in the second half of the nineteenth century Genoa assumes a leading role in the process of growth of the country. In this way, the city's élite dedicates particular attention to the happenings concerning university education. Podestà fights for the official recognition of Genoa University at the level of the leading Universities, possible also thanks to the financial support of the Town Hall. He then participates at the birth of two new institutions for higher education at Genoa: the Royal High Naval School and the High School for Commerce, the future faculties of Engineering and Economy and Commerce. In 1869, Stefano Castagnola, Genoese deputy, future Mayor and Minister of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, becomes promoter of the first school: in his role as Mayor, Podestà collaborates with Castagnola. Both are on the Board of Governors of the institution, which would become a type of "sea polytechnic", capable of training for engineering, maritime and naval mechanics. On the other hand the High School for the application of commercial studies was founded in 1884, to provide the preparation for those who are called to work in the world of commerce and business, for which not only an education based on practical experience is required, but also one supported by solid theoretical knowledge. Podestà presides over the Board of Governors of the Genoese school.

In this way the culture of the city was promoted, along with technical and applied sciences, in the seats for education, together with the architectural interventions in the city, a real 'cultural policy' is created. The term "demolition" when used to refer to the total ordering of the ancient city was not taken badly, because it was understood also to mean "improvement" and "great hygienic reorganisation"; but it goes

together with an attentive restoration of individual monuments, those of the nineteenth century and the medieval ones, which underlines the role of communication of the memory of the homeland.

Due to the Podestà's interest the restoration of Porta Soprana and Palazzo San Giorgio get under way; it is his idea to restore to their original forms the SottoRipa porticoes, removing the constructions which had distorted their shapes throughout the centuries, and to recuperate the former size of the double open gallery of Commenda di Prè.

All this helps in creating a particular image of Genoa, looking to the future, but at the same time, not forgetting its past. As the city wants to assert its role and prestige, certain events must be foreseen which, especially in the XIX century, contribute to the creation of an image: the great international exhibitions.

In 1867, by the Mayor's choice, the commune participates in the Universal Exhibition in Paris, exhibiting works of art, statues and photos of the city. Then in 1892, Genoa is at the centre of the Columbus celebrations (fig. 7). The interest around the famous navigator had been revived by a study published in 1882, which identified his house in a small building close to Porta Soprana; in 1887 Podestà decides that the commune should purchase it. From the beginning of the eighties he organises a committee to prepare the programme for the Italo-American Exhibition of 1892. In a continuous accumulation of proposals and suggestions and with the uncertainty of having adequate finances the work goes on: in 1890 a single committee gathers together all the best energy available for the occasion, who can count on Podestà's support, Mayor once again in 1892.

The Exhibition, which takes place on the Bisagno plain from July to December is visited by 800,000 people and is accompanied by countless other events which take place in the exhibition area and in the city. The huge crowd – the papers speak of 40,000 people – which throng the city on the 9th September 1892 to see the King and Queen accompanied by the Mayor, visiting the exhibition and the city, is experienced by Podestà with the full knowledge of his own

role and of the prestige achieved. This role and this prestige were still to be earned, when in 1866 he had welcomed in to his home in Via Garibaldi Vittorio Emanuele II, who was at Genoa with his son Umberto and his newly-wed Margherita (fig. 5). Two moments most certainly dealt with by Podestà with flair and with his characteristic determination, which both symbolise the ascent and the definitive success of this protagonist of nineteenth century Genoa

Bibliography

In spite of his importance, specific studies on Podestà do not exist today, even though he is spoken about in numerous publications. To find contemporary testimonies on his life and his works, even if characterised by triumphant tones, see: "Genova nella morte del Barone Andrea Podestà," by the Municipio, Genoa 1895; "Andrea Podestà. Commemorazione fatta il 4 marzo del 1900 nell'Aula Magna dell'Ateneo genovese" (by Anton Giulio Barrili), Genoa 1900; Giacomo Falcone, Andrea Podestà, in "Da Genova all'Eritrea. Numero unico delle missioni dell'Eritrea", Genoa 1895. An outline of the context in which Podestà worked is proposed by P. Massa, "Andrea Podestà, sindaco di una città tra vecchia e nuova economia," in "Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria", vol. XXXVI, fasc. II, 1996, accompanied by a useful bibliography. A recent general summary of the history of the city is offered by the volume "Storia di Genova. Mediterraneo, Europa. Atlantico," by D. Puncuh, Genoa 2003.

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