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**Francesco Patrizi's *Città Felice* Within the Context
of Mediterranean Culture**

Since the Romans, who built their empire around the Mediterranean and viewed this vast expanse of water as part of their territory, the vocation of what they called *Mare nostrum* has been to be a sea-road, travelled and known intimately by all the peoples who lived along its shores. Since times immemorable, the people of the Mediterranean influenced each other in matters of family relations, religion, law, philosophy, mores, and city government. In philosophy, the influence of Greek thought and civilization was paramount and reached much further than the shores of the Mediterranean. Plato's *Republic* for example had a great influence on Thomas More's *Utopia*, an imaginary land off the coast of South America, where people lived in reciprocal respect and harmony. By the middle of the sixteenth century, More's *Utopia* was introduced in Italy, where several writers tried their hand at writing (sometimes creating) utopias of their own. One such author was Francesco Patrizi, born in Cherso, Dalmatia in 1529. He grew up in what was then a frontier city, because at the time the Dalmatian coast was at the periphery of the Venetian commercial empire. From the age of seven he worked in a galley with his uncle and had the opportunity to travel all over the Mediterranean; but he had strong intellectual inclinations, and eventually moved to Padua to study medicine. After his father's death, he left medicine for

philosophy and later in life, in 1578-79, he became professor of Platonism at Ferrara. When he wrote *La città felice* he was only twenty-two (in 1553), but from a literary point of view, this is no immature work; critics have in fact defined it “polished like a cameo, lustrous like a Murano glass.”¹ Although Patrizi chose to write it in the form of a philosophical treatise rather than a dialogue, *La città felice* was clearly inspired by Plato’s *Republic*. In fact, of all the Italian utopias of the Renaissance, this is the one that follows Plato most closely.

If, as scholars of imaginary societies commonly hold it, utopias arise from a sense of scarcity, then in Patrizi there is a clear understanding that his *città felice* should provide some of the things that were scarce in Sixteenth-century society, namely, material things. In this he follows Plato, who in book II of the *Republic* wrote that men who organize themselves in a city would first of all produce “wine, food and shoes.” Patrizi wrote “abbia a mangiare e bere dunque la città se desidera vivere ed essere beata;” and he continues by describing how his blessed city should go about procuring food and shelter for its inhabitants. In order to produce food the city needs an appropriate amount of land, and workers to cultivate it. The ideal worker needs to be strong and resilient, but at the same of a shy and cowardly nature, to avoid the risk of workers’ rebellion. He defines this specific kind of men “*servo per propria natura*,” thus using an ancient Aristotelian dichotomy between free men and those who are slaves by nature. Such distinction is problematic even in Aristotle, because it does not clarify, for example, whether or not the condition of *natural slavery* is hereditary, whether it should be extended to foreigners, whether it might be reversible across the generations, and finally whether or not slaves who prove to not be born as slaves should be set free.

For the purpose of his *città felice* however, Patrizi seems to consider the existence of people who are “by nature” servants

¹ Enzo Petrini. *Francesco Patrizi da Cherso* (Trieste: Ricerche, 1991) 10. The translation is mine.

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as unproblematic, so much so that he lays the foundations of his *Città felice* on the assumption that strong but shy, resilient but cowardly men indeed exist and are willing and able to provide the workforce necessary to cultivate the land for the whole *città felice*. As an extreme measure, rebellion should be punished with death, a swift way, says Patrizi, to eliminate most of the lawyers, courts and judges.

Good climate and good position were essential to the functioning of Patrizi's model, as he assigns great importance to the site where the *città felice* will be built. Such location needs to be chosen accurately, and has a recognizable Mediterranean character. Patrizi writes that the city should be founded in a temperate area, possibly by the sea. It should be partially built on the hillside, to benefit from the breezes and from the elevation in the summer, and partially in a valley, to avoid the winds during the winter. In the summer, the heat should be avoided by sitting in the shade, by following the breezes, and by dressing lightly. One can find shade on verandas, in first floor rooms, and the breezes in high terraces².

It is important that the city be built away from swamps and forests. In the forests there is an abundance of certain plants, such as cypresses, firs, and ivy, that by trapping humidity, were belie-ved to be responsible for "unhealthy air"³. The diet of the citizens had to be wholesome, abundant and carefully prepared; this required a number of men to work the land and cooks to prepare the meals, so that the citizens could be free "to be masters."⁴

² "Il caldo noioso della state si fugge, seguendo l'ombre, i freschi e l'aure, con poco carico di vestimenti. L'ombre e 'l fresco si hanno nelle loggie, e nelle camere terrene, e l'aure in que' luoghi dove ci può tirare il vento; e tali sono i luoghi rilevati, ed aperti, ed a questo fine sono comode le loggie alte alle quali cose fare ci si adopra l'architettura, con le sue ministre." Francesco Patrizi, *La città felice*, Carlo Curcio, *Utopisti italiani del Cinquecento*, 95.

³ "aere distemperato," *ibidem*, 96.

⁴ Francesco Patrizi. "La città felice" Carlo Curcio, *Utopisti italiani del Cinquecento*, 90.

Patrizi's suggestions regarding the topography of the town, as well as the choice of climate and buildings, were quite useful and responded to common sense and good city planning. Some of his prescriptions are still valid today, as the world looks for sustainable communities and the use of natural resources, favourable locations, winds, vegetation.

Geographically, other Adriatic port cities, such as Trieste, might have been able to qualify as *città felici*; not only did Patrizi take inspiration from the general Mediterranean ambiance for his utopia, but in the location and the geographical prescriptions for his *città felice*, he highlighted the best features of the cities that he admired, such as Athens, and Cherso, and Rome, laying the foundations for a generic Mediterranean *locus amoenus*. Fernand Braudel, in his book on the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II seems to have the explanation as to why the Patrizi's model was so prevalent in the Mediterranean:

“a hillside civilization. Where mountains and planes meet, at the edge of the foothills (in Morocco known as Dir) run narrow ribbons of flourishing, established ways of life. Perhaps it is because between the 200 and 400 metres they have found the optimum conditions of the Mediterranean habitat, above the unhealthy vapors of the plain, but within the limits within which the coltura mista can prosper. The mountain's water resources also allow irrigation and the cultivation of the gardens which are the beauty in these narrow regions”⁵.

The goal of the *città felice* is happiness, which is a complex concept in Patrizi's utopia. Both physical and metaphysical, it is on the one hand extended to all the inhabitants of the utopia, as the result of living a life in a temperate climate without starvation. On the other hand, there is a special kind of happiness that is only designed for the people belonging to the upper classes. The “natural masters” in fact,

⁵ Fernand Braudel: *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 1966. New York, Harper, 1972. Translated by Siân Reynolds. 55-56

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are destined to drink from the so-called *acque celesti* and attain a state of bliss. It is not clear in the text what these *acque* concretely are; there is no mention of a source (*fonte*) although the author repeatedly refers to a blessed vortex (*beato gorgo*)⁶ and to the fact that these *acque celesti* descend from above. The vortex seems to symbolize a perspective of constant regeneration, and the *Città felice* represents a place where citizens can quench their thirst with blessed waters. Carlo Curcio surmised that the *acque celesti* might have meant a sort of Christian regeneration⁷. Although Christianity is never openly mentioned in this utopia, from a religious point of view Patrizi's *Città felice* seems to propose a blend of Christianity and Platonism. However, the aristocratic model offered by Plato's Republic overshadows the concept of brotherhood, central in Christianity and in more egalitarian utopias. Patrizi's city is in fact truly happy only if a selected group of citizens is allowed to attain the blessed state. Although the goal of the *Città felice* is to experience the *acque celesti*, some of members of the society only help others attain illumination, but do not participate in such a blessed state themselves. Builders, carpenters, cooks, farmers, and other service people help the blessed ones, but they are not allowed to attain the *acque celesti*, because that is not their purpose in society.

Much like Plato, Patrizi proposed for his community a rigid class separation; however, compared Plato, he doubled the number of social classes to accommodate the needs of the new mercantile society of which he was an attentive witness. He divided the citizens in six classes: farmers, artisans, merchants, warriors, magistrates, and priests. The first three groups did not have access to the *acque celesti*, but they facilitated the attainment of illumination for the other three classes. The political structure of the city was a government of the elderly that would serve in office on a rotation basis. It is likely that he

⁶ Francesco Patrizi, "La città felice" Carlo Curcio, *Utopisti italiani del Cinquecento*, 112.

⁷ Carlo Curcio, *Utopisti italiani del Cinquecento*, 88.

had in mind the political structure of some successful oligarchies of the time, such as the Republic of Venice, which had long represented a myth and a model for political writers⁸. Since every citizen of the *città felice* was bound to perform only one function and could never change his social status, Patrizi's utopia, in all its tameness and gentleness, sanctioned and gave theoretical background to social inequality.

Notwithstanding the rigid class divisions within the society, Patrizi was convinced that love was the founding force of his utopia. He contended that crimes were the result of a loveless society, and that in a city where people cared for one other, crime would not exist. Therefore legislators were to foster love in the community by encouraging people to become acquainted with one another. Civic functions in public places would give people the opportunity to overcome isolation and create a close-knit community, while the family remained the nuclear unit of the society for all social classes. Patrizi does not make any provisions to prevent social injustice, not any provisional mechanism to eliminate tyranny, perhaps on the assumption that the moderation and gentleness that characterize *La città felice* meant to shelter it from tyranny altogether.

The idea of a society based on love and family is rather common, but love and family alone have never sheltered any society from crime. It can be argued that Patrizi's solution to keep harmony in the society is too simplistic, because even groups that are ostensibly based on love (such as monasteries) do not necessarily prevent crime. One possible conclusion is that Patrizi wrote this utopia when he was only twenty-two years old, and that perhaps at that age one is not equipped to see the complexity of a phenomenon, such as crime in the society, and inclined to find inadequate solution it. There are other, more complex hypotheses to be made, that might explain Patrizi's interest in a close-knit society based on love and family, and place it in the context of Mediterranean culture.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the myth of Venice see Chapter 1, 26.

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It is difficult to love one another in a context of social inequality. The Christian teaching to love one another does not agree with the teaching of Plato, that each person should perform one task only and do it well, thereby each person is tied for life to his or her own social class and purpose. While these two positions (love and social inequality) are at odds with one another, they do not seem to be in contradiction in the *città felice*; but if love alone is not enough to warrant lack of conflict in the society, it is possible that Patrizi might have taken for granted another aspect of close-knit societies, something that was so prevalent in the world in which he lived that he perhaps did not deem necessary to render it explicit.

What might be so prevalent in Mediterranean, close-knit societies that could also be useful as a means to maintain social peace and the status quo at the same time? John Peristiany, a social anthropologist who worked extensively in the area of the Mediterranean, has a passage that might shed some light on this issue: “the constant preoccupations of individuals in small scale, exclusive societies where to face personal, as opposed to anonymous relations is of paramount importance and where the social personality of the actors is as significant as his office” are honor, and its opposite, shame. How honor and shame work together is explained by Julian Pitt-Rivers: “Honor provides the nexus between the ideals of a society and their reproduction in the individual.”⁹

Moreover, when the individual is “encapsulated” in a close-knit social group an aspersion on his honor is an aspersion on the honor of his group, writes Peristiany. And it is understood that knowing each other, that is, common knowledge is extremely important for the shame and honour society. When Patrizi speaks of a society in which people know each other, he might also mean that such a society must be governed by a system of shame and honor, because, strictly speaking, to know other members of one’s society does not necessarily mean to

⁹ Julian Pitt-River, *Mediterranean Countrymen*, Paris: Mouton, 1963, 9.

love them all. But certainly, if common knowledge is in place then, at least in Mediterranean societies, a system of honor and shame is also in place. Pitt-Rivers writes that honor is irrevocably committed by attitudes expressed in the presence of witnesses, the representatives of public opinion. Therefore, if to know the members of one's own group does not necessarily yield love for the community, it is possible that love, together with a system of shame and honor, might guarantee a society in which there is no or little social mobility and three of the social classes actively help the others to attain the blissful status of *acquae celesti*.

Utopias frequently resemble the society where their author lives, whether directly as an idealized portrait, or indirectly, as specular image¹⁰. The physical structure of the *città felice*, a crescent moon with a castle on each cusp, was probably inspired by a famous illustration of More's *Utopia* that appeared in the Basel 1518 edition¹¹. Thomas More placed his island in a location that, like his native England, had a mildly unfavorable climate, in order to show how his model would have worked even in mildly adverse circumstances. Francesco Patrizi conceived of his utopia in the most favourable place, in order to show that, given favourable circumstances, good climate, good food, and a rational organization of work, any city of the Mediterranean could become a happy city, and some of their inhabitants attain the state of bliss. Thomas More wrote *Utopia* thinking of a specular portrayal of England, whereas Patrizi's *Città felice* was an attempt to rationalize and improve on a city model that already existed. Venice, Trieste, Cherso, and innumerable other cities of the Mediterranean would have

¹⁰ Most scholars tend to agree on this topic: see Alberto Petrucciani, *La finzione e la persuasione. L'utopia come genere letterario* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1983) and Robert Glenn Negley, *The Quest for Utopia* (College Park, Md.: McGrath, 1952).

¹¹ The woodcut is reproduced on the cover of the Yale edition of More's *Utopia*, edited by Edward Surtz. Thomas More, *Utopia*, Edward Surtz ed. (Yale University Press, 1964).

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been likely candidates, either geographically, climatically and anthropologically, to become *città felici*.

He took already existing social structures and customs (government by the elderly, class divisions, close-knit societies, and arguably a shame-and-honor system) and gave them a philosophical structure; he did not require revolutions or radical changes, just good food, good company, a rational structure and the mostly attainable goal of the *acque celesti*. It is easy to see how a small Mediterranean town, where the social conflicts have been somehow resolved, could be considered a happy city; for this reason, Patrizi's *Città felice* was an idealized version of something that already existed, a sort of Edenic paradise, governed by the elderly, surrounded by sacred waters.