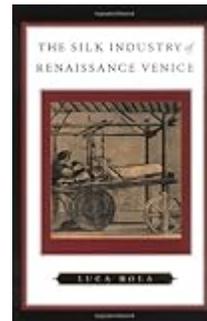




**Luca Mola.** *The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xix + 457. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6189-5.



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Renaissance (Central and Northern) Italy was arguably the richest country in Europe, if not in the world. A sizable part of its wealth came from manufacturing, and silk was one of the most important industries in Italy. Malanima estimates that, around 1570, the production of silk accounted for about two percent of the GNP, and industrial processing was responsible for a further three percent (Paolo Melanoma, *La fine del primato*, Milano, 1998, pp.170 and 174). Yet this industry is strangely under-researched. Until the publication of this massive volume, there was hardly a single modern work on the silk industry in any major Italian city. Thus, Mola's book is especially welcome.

The first chapter describes the diffusion of silk processing in Italy. In the Middle Ages it had settled in Lucca, and from there it spread in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to all major Italian cities and to some minor ones. The second chapter describes this process, focusing on the key role of the migration of entrepreneurs and skilled workers. Their human capital was precious, and all city governments tried to control its flow. Cities that desired to participate in the silk business enticed the workers with prizes, tax exemptions and privileges; conversely the established production centers tried to prevent emigration, sometimes with very drastic measures (up to the death penalty). The very spread of the industry

illustrates that the obstacles to migration were more impressive than effective. The mobility was high, and there was an almost free market for workers, at least among the major centers.

The second part of the book deals with the business in the city of Venice. Chapter three describes the supply of raw material – the raw silk from overseas (the production on the mainland is dealt with later) and the spinning of it in the city. Venice imported silk from four main areas: Persia, the Balkans, Southern Italy and Spain. The city then re-exported it to other Italian cities and abroad. Re-export was a highly lucrative trade, but it supplied Venice' competitors. Thus, the official policy oscillated between free trade (which suited merchants but allegedly harmed the local industry) and regulation (which was difficult to enforce, and entailed the risk of diverting trade towards other routes).

Chapter four deals with the demand for silk clothes. Of course, they were a luxury item, but their use was more widespread than one might suppose, thanks also to a flourishing trade in second-hand material. The supply was divided according to the ultimate use and to the quality of cloth in five classes: panni domestici (for local consumption), da navegar (for export overseas), da fontego (for export to Central Europe), mezzani (medium-quality cloths) and da parangon (for comparison). The produc-

tion was subject to increasingly strict regulation as the quality improved. The *panni domestici* could be made as the (local) customer wished, while the *panni da paragon* – the best ones – had to be produced only with the best silk in prescribed quantities and sizes. The guild officials assumed that only a strict control of the output could maintain the Venetian industry's reputation for excellence. Of course, these rules were not easy to enforce.

Chapter five deals with dyeing. As in the previous chapter, the focus is on the tension between the desire to prevent fraud by keeping a high quality via a strict regulation and the need to innovate and satisfy the consumers' desire for cheaper cloths. The main innovation was the introduction of new, cheaper pigments from South America, which was bitterly fought by some members of the guilds. In the end, however, their use was allowed. The same pattern prevailed in weaving, the subject of chapter six. The consumers wanted cheaper and lighter fabrics. Producers were ready to provide them, sometimes by fraudulent means (e.g. by increasing the weight of cloths by adding some "paste"). Meanwhile the guilds tried to regulate and control the process, alternating periods of liberalization and re-regulation.

Chapter seven also follows the same thread, addressing the use of other materials, such as cotton, wool and waste silk (a by-product of silk reeling), which could reduce the cost of the cloths. Mixed fabrics had been the norm in the Middle Ages, to be – at least in theory – outlawed later in the quest for quality. In the sixteenth century the use of other fibers was cautiously allowed in the production of low-quality cloths but strictly forbidden for high-quality ones.

The last chapter of this part focuses on innovations, using a database of the some forty silk patents granted between 1474 and 1600 according to a 1474 law. The author stresses, as he does in the previous discussion, that the Venetian industry was not impervious to change.

The third part of Mola's book deals with the expansion of the silk industry on the mainland. Chapter nine describes the diffusion of the production of raw silk (sericulture) in the Northern Italian countryside. Vicenza (near Venice) was one of the oldest sericultural areas in the North, but in the sixteenth century sericulture spread throughout the whole Veneto. The author reports some estimates of total output: at the beginning of the seventeenth century the Terraferma (mainland state) produced some 150 tons of raw silk, being the third largest producer in Italy after Calabria and Sicily.

Chapter ten deals with the uses of this silk. Part of it was indeed used in Venice, but most of the silk was exported after being spun (thrown) and after having paid a duty. This duty was meant to increase the production costs of foreign competitors and to increase the revenues of the Venetian state. However, the duty itself was not crushingly high, as silk was extremely easy to smuggle. The remaining silk was woven in the mainland cities such as Vicenza, Bassano, Verona and others. Actually, the development of their industries had been long hampered by the hostility of Venetian guilds. Weaving had been forbidden in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. However, the prohibition was officially lifted, after years of insistence, for some types of fabrics only – notably the black velvets. Later, the Mainland cities were to specialize in light fabrics and especially in mixed cloths.

At the beginning of the book the author quite accurately states his purpose: "filling the gap in Venetian historiography about the silk industry with an appraisal of the entire body of laws on the silk industry of the Venetian state" (p. xviii). He accomplishes his task very well, providing a lot of useful, interesting and sometimes entertaining information from a variety of sources (including textbooks and judiciary sources) while providing some insightful discussion. Especially important is the stress on the innovation in product and, to some extent, in process (especially for dyeing). The author questions the conventional wisdom about the negative effects of guilds' regulation on innovation, and thus on the competitiveness of the Venetian industry. However, the present reviewer would have appreciated a bolder approach. The author follows his sources skillfully but sometimes too closely. He discusses dozens of regulating decisions by several bodies on different issues, and this might be confusing. Inclusion of a table with the dates of main laws and decrees would have been useful. Above all, the author does not dare to go beyond his sources, and this has two drawbacks. First, by their very nature, the laws and decrees do not reveal much about the interests involved in the decision-making process, while the petitions and judiciary acts are one-sided. The author could have used some simple economic reasoning to debunk self-interested claims and to assess the likely effect of different policies. Secondly, he does not tackle some key questions that might be of interest to economic historians outside the circle of specialists on the economy of Renaissance Venice. How much did the policies he so carefully describes contribute to (or harm) the development of the silk industry? Was the location of the silk industry determined by supply-side or demand-side fac-

tors? How much did the Venetian economy benefit from the silk industry?

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