

The Materiality of Res Publica

The Materiality of Res Publica:
How to Do Things with Publics

Edited by

Dominique Colas and Oleg Kharkhordin

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P U B L I S H I N G

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

OLEG KHARKHORDIN

Political science for the last 100 years traditionally concentrated on the *publica* part of the expression *res publica*, conceiving this notion as a form of government opposed to, say, monarchy. However, the ancients and citizens of Renaissance republics paid as much attention to the *res* part of this expression. The goal of this volume is to draw attention to this *res*, things or affairs that bring people together. A similar insight has been recently offered by the French school of science and technology studies (STS), best exemplified in the works of Bruno Latour, who examines how human communities change to become durable and tangible with the help of networks of very mundane elements that tie them together (pipes, wires, information networks, etc.).¹ However, science and technology studies, aimed at analyzing contemporary intertwining of humans and what they call non-humans, usually ignore the two thousand year long tradition of thinking about *res publica*, starting from Roman thought and going through the Middle Ages to the republics of early modern Europe.

The goal of the present book is to correct this oversight and to examine the role of *res* in different historical versions of *res publica*: starting from the time this Latin expression entered the thought of Cicero and Roman law to the times of *res publica anglicana* (in particular, to the era of Hobbes) and to *la Republique Francaise*.

This book is, to a large extent, a result of an integrated research project, conducted in 2005-7, which first aimed at comparing tangible shared things in the republics of Venice and Novgorod; then other areas of expertise were brought in, for comparative purposes.² Initially, medieval

¹ Another decisive influence is the new sociology of action of Laurent Thevenot that pays a lot of attention to objects.

² INTAS grant 04-79-7107 “Bridges as *res publicae*: implications for modern self-government in Western and Eastern Europe” paid for the bulk of this research.

bridges in both republics—the wooden Rialto in Venice (which existed until 1587) and the Great bridge in Novgorod - were examined as examples of *choses publiques*, or *res publicae*, central for their economic, political and religious importance. For example, the reconstruction of the Rialto in stone in the XVI century took eighty years because of the large construction expenditures, battles over the choice of subcontractors, the relocation of adjacent buildings, and the political message that the bridge design could carry in the context of the Spanish threat and papal politics at that time, and so on. Similarly, the Great Bridge in Novgorod was central for the republican political economy—e.g. administrative units and parishes lying as far away as 500 miles had to supply logs or provide funds for its maintenance and repairs. Also, it played a central role as the site for executions following rowdy public assemblies, and for fights between political factions. Icons incorporated the bridge as a central element of the city, because very often events on the bridge, or misfortunes that happened to it, were taken as expressions of God’s will. This gave the bridge a heightened religious significance as well.³

The history of the wooden Rialto has not been provided in detail, in English, until this project. Donatella Calabi from the IUAV University of Venice, one of the authors of the best extant book on the stone Rialto, has now fulfilled this task. Research in Novgorod was also unique. This famous Russian republic (which existed in 1136-1478, until it was captured by Muscovy) was chosen because it does not have remaining medieval archives and thus offers a particularly interesting mirror to the Venetian—or West European, for that matter—experience. Given that there are no public documents that could speak for the republic, the bridge, since it is one of the central things belonging to it, has been entrusted with this role. Underwater excavations were conducted in 2005-7, the results of which are documented in this book. Research was done under four to eight meters of brownish water of a very fast flowing, muddy, northern river, with visibility of 5 cm in the summer and about one meter in the winter. By contrast, in the Venetian lagoon, for example, when one is searching for the remains of medieval boats, vertical steel fencing is hammered

Grants from the Academy of Finland to Kharkhordin, Lehtonen and Risto Alapuro (the latter—within the framework of “Russia in Flux” program) paid for conference travel, writing up and publication preparation. Moscow-based *Dinastia* Foundation paid for the initial presentation of results at the AAASS Convention in New Orleans in November 2007.

³ See this argument initially spelled out in Oleg Kharkhordin, “Things as *Res Publicae*: Making Things Public,” in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

around the presumed sites, water is pumped out, and research performed as if on a dried out riverbed. In London, where research was done on the remains of Roman and medieval bridges, archeologists could work in the wharves, without the need of going underwater. In Novgorod the research was different—the most successful finds occurred in freezing winter conditions of minus 15 degrees Centigrade, when there was clear visibility, no algae in the water and no water transport circulation to thwart research, as in summer. Multiple photos in the chapter by Sergei Troianovskii show this extraordinary effort.

While engaged in comparing empirical findings of the Russian case with those of the Venetian case, achieved after thorough archival searches, it became necessary for researchers to consult and invite for discussions representatives of two other areas of knowledge. The first one is a growing volume of literature on republican political theory, which—after the fall of Marxism—has emerged as the only credible freedom-asserting alternative of liberalism. Quentin Skinner from Cambridge—a renowned representative of this tradition—was progressively more and more involved with discussions of the role of *res* in republican theory. His contribution initially involved a reassessment of the most intense moment of republican experience during the English revolution from the standpoint of an interest in the materiality of this experience. Later he wrote a special piece on the materiality of the Hobbes's representation of *res publica*, which is included as a chapter in this volume.⁴ Dominique Colas from Sciences Po, who was the director of the INTAS team from the West European side, contributed a comparison of the French case with his research on the role of symbols of *la Republique*, and its reliance on the early modern imagery of a woman with city ramparts on her head. My own chapter compressed two years of the project's discussions on the history of the Latin term *res publica* and its importance for political philosophy of republicanism in the article that sums up conceptual development from Cicero to Justinian—in order to evaluate the full theoretical implications of the term.

The second large body of literature, which was also integrated into the project, were contemporary studies of material settings and networks in sociology and anthropology. Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen from the University of Helsinki contributed a disciplined methodological dimension to the largely comparative cross-cultural research, by offering an overview of the

⁴ Professor Skinner gave lectures on both of these topics, the first one during the seminar *The Materiality of res publica*, held at the European University at St. Petersburg on May 25-26, 2007, and the second during the seminar *Lecons de choses publiques*, which was held on April 11, 2008 at Sciences Po in Paris.

latest interest in materiality in social sciences, particularly in works of actor-network theory of Bruno Latour and the work on material culture among anthropologists and sociologists, in the style of Daniel Miller from University College London.

The structure of the book is as follows. In Part 1, “*Res Publicae* as Things that Matter to Publics”, the two main cases of republican concern, i.e. the bridges, are introduced. In chapter 2, Donatella Calabi stresses that bridge-keeping is mentioned as one of the duties of Venetian magistrates since the second half of the XIII century, and the Rialto is one of their central concerns. Every forty to fifty years the bridge is remodeled; every twenty five years from the beginning of a new phase, a restoration may take place. The image, quality and dimensions of the old wooden bridge determined its history in the future. For those who had to reconstruct it in stone what mattered most were which features to eliminate and which to preserve. Given the large expenditure amount and the symbolic significance of the bridge, the decision to rebuild the Rialto in stone was finally adopted only after protracted political fights over contracts, design and imagery. In the end, it was medieval practices of bridge construction and maintenance that were deemed as most important, and this choice signified a path-dependent development of the republic in the future. The chapter describes which tangible concerns constituted the main objects and political points of contention at the time.

Chapter 3 on the medieval wooden Great Bridge of Novgorod presents a similar story. It was the only multi-season bridge in all of Russia until the end of the XVII century, when the first stone bridge was built in Moscow. The rest of the country used floating bridges in the summer, and drove on ice in the winter. But its greatness lay not in its architectural quality, but rather, in its political, cultural and economic significance. Economically, this very sizable thing tied the republic together because even distant parishes had to submit means and supplies to maintain this single crossing across the river that separated the city. Politically, it served as the site where warring city factions could meet, and where, at the decision of the popular assembly, the condemned were thrown into the water. Many a local magistrate lost his life this way. Archbishops (the only archbishops in Europe selected by lot!) mediated the conflicts, but frequently could not stop them, even when they physically blocked access of warring parties to each other by staging a cross-bearing procession on the bridge. Trade flourished on the bridge, though we are not sure whether it was there during the republican era. Underwater archeological research has shed more light on these aspects of city life. Further comparison of the story of the Great Bridge with that of the Rialto is a task for the future,

however. Novgorod research has to reveal more features of the political economy of the bridge enabling one to find more direct parallels between the two stories. It should be pointed out, however, that both bridges were built next to German trading houses, and had central significance for internal republican life, given the huge public expenditure of bridge maintenance and reconstruction.

Part 2 of the book, called “*Res* in other *res publicae*”, contains chapters by Quentin Skinner and Dominique Colas. Both articles offer reflections on the importance of the materiality of symbols rather than just the materiality of the republican concerns themselves. Skinner shows how the demands of rhetoric pushed Hobbes to present his argument on sovereignty in the most vivid, that is, visible way—accessible to a reader in his or her quality as a viewer of illustrations to a book. Analysis of frontispieces of Hobbes’ books, as well as the images from other books of the time allows us to draw a conclusion on the thrust of Hobbes’s argument on *res publica*, including *res publica anglicana*, just created in the result of the English Revolution.

In his chapter, Colas takes off from the ancient Greek and Roman definition of a polity as a piece of land delimited by a wall; i.e. by ramparts. This meant that a city could be represented by Cybele, the earth goddess, figured as a rampart-crowned woman. The same iconographic model could also represent politics itself—this is how Rubens used it. The model is present in several modern European cities. In Paris in the early nineteenth century, dozens of statues of rampart-crowned women representing cities in the French national space or European capitals were erected. Later in the century, during the Third Republic, between 1871 and 1914, the French authorities sought to make it clear that their *res publica* was republican in character. For the city of Paris this meant that thousands of images of the city’s coat-of-arms or symbol, topped with a circle of ramparts, came to adorn public buildings, and that female statues representing Paris and other cities were figured with the same crown. Prague imported the model from France in the early twentieth century to assert its claim that it was a capital city, even though the nation-state in which it held this function did not yet exist, and would not exist until the end of the Habsburg Empire. In Italy, where individual countries were already being represented in the Renaissance as human figures wearing a crown of ramparts, the model seldom figured a capital because unifying Italy was a long and complicated process. Concluding with a reflection on the disappearance of the model of the rampart-crowned republic in Paris today (the statues are still there, but they are no longer viewed in accordance with the intention behind them), Colas finds not that there the

public space is regressing but rather that it is being invested with new forms, new, strong « public things » of many sorts that can no longer be integrated into a great narrative of the sort that *la République* has been in France.

Part 3 of the book considers the theoretical implications of paying more attention to the *res* part of the expression *res publica*. My own chapter deals with the history of the Latin term from the time of Cicero to the time of emperor Justinian and his codifiers, with a particular attention to the “thingly” connotation of the term. It first examines the expression *res publicae* (in the plural form), looking for those instances in Roman law, when this expression was used to denote “things public.” Then it examines republican usage around the time of Cicero. After that the term *res publica* in the singular form is studied in the same way. Both exercises yield a conclusion that extant usage rarely points to the things. Rather it mostly designated public affairs, rather than things, if it designated anything at all. The connotation of “things public” progressively intensifies with the growth of the Empire and the need to codify and streamline its laws, which are supposed to point rather unambiguously to the empirical referents of expressions *res publica* and *res publicae*.

But the key part of the chapter goes a bit beyond a detailed analysis of historical word usage, and concentrates on a debate between Cicero and Ceasar on the thingness of *res publica*. Imperial habit—from Ceasar to Justinian—was to either point to the tangible good that could be called *res publica*, or to expunge the usage that referred to incorporeal *res publica* as nonsense. Republican habit, best exemplified by Cicero, would claim that a definition of what was in *res publica* interests was always subject to a clash of different speech acts, naming *res publica*. And it was this clash and contention that testified to the republican quality of politics. The materiality of the republic then lies in the materiality of speech acts involving it and its interests, and the essay finishes by posing a question on a general theory of Roman speech acts as a key to a mystery of *res publica*.

Finally, a chapter by Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen considers a general topic of how materiality features in recent debates in social sciences. When the concept of materiality is encountered in contemporary public discussions, it is mostly in the context of critiques of the current Euro-American way of life. Critics deplore an obvious spread of “material values” of consumer civilization and a hedonistic search for pleasure that eschew concern for the public good. Starting from the analysis of this usage—which points to a situation largely incompatible with republican concerns—the chapter moves on to explore the concept of materiality in different theoretical

traditions. Classical forms of materialism, i.e. ontological, ethical and historical, do not seem felicitous for our concerns with understanding materiality in a contemporary world. Recent debates in social sciences are then overviewed: on which grounds is it claimed that the concept of materiality is something that really matters for social sciences? And what is meant by “materiality” in this context? The chapter ends by a programmatic conclusion: materiality might become a central concept for human sciences, if we are to understand what life in contemporary world consists of. One may add: studies of the *res* part in the classical tradition of thinking about *res publica*, and of acting on or in the interests of *res publica* will surely address this point.

In conclusion, one should mention people who helped during research and preparation of this book, which turned out to be a joint undertaking bringing many people together. The first to thank is Aivar Stepanov, the head of the archeological section of the Russian Divers’ Union, who organized and supervised the underwater excavations in Novgorod. Without his talents and perseverance we would not have achieved such a remarkable result in such a short period of time. Assistants at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies have spent lots of time and effort helping research, with Kirsi Reyes and Svetlana Kirichenko being most important in finally bringing this book together. We should thank translators who rendered texts into English—Evgenii Roshchin for the Troianovskii chapter and Amy Jacobs for the Colas chapter, while special thanks go to Caroline Bruzelius for editing the Calabi chapter and Kirsi Reyes for the rest of the volume.

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PART I.

***RES PUBLICAE* AS THINGS THAT MATTER
TO PUBLICS.**

THE MAIN COMPARISON OF THE BOOK

CHAPTER TWO

RIALTO: THE MEDIEVAL BRIDGE

DONATELLA CALABI

The First Bridge on the Grand Canal

Chronicles of the 15th century often attributed the first bridge on the Grand Canal of Venice to the Lombard Master Barettier and dated it to 1173, during the rule of Doge Sebastiano Ziani¹. According to these sources, this bridge was reconstructed on a larger scale in 1255². Earlier sources, however, suggest that the first bridge was built only much later, in 1264, under Renier Zeno³. In fact, Andrea Dandolo tells us that until the rule of Zeno (doge between 1253 and 1268), the city of Rialto was separated by a canal (“Civitas quoque Rivoaltina [...] mediatione canalibus actenus divisa fuerat”) and only at that time was it united by a wooden bridge “ex ligni pontis constructione unita est”. According to this account, the new bridge replaced a system of ferry boats paid for by a coin (moneta), and it is thought that this could be the origin of the name of the first bridge (“Ponte

¹ Antonio Vitturi, *Cronaca di Venezia dalle origini al 1396*, BNMV (Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana di Venezia, hereafter cited only as BNMV), ms. It. VII, 2051 (=8271), c. 17 v.;

Cronaca detta Venera fino al 1580, BNMV, Ms. It. VII, 791 (=7589), c. 67 v.; Giorgio Dolfin, *Cronaca Veneta dalle origini al 1458*, BNMV, ms. It. VII, 794 (=8503), c. 69 r.; Marin Sanudo, *Vite dei Dogi*, in Ludovico Antonio Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, edited by Giovanni Monticolo, Città di Castello 1900-1911. vol. XXII, 286.

² Giambattista Galliccioli, *Delle memorie venete antiche profane ed ecclesiastiche* (Venice, 1795), vol. I, 145.

³ Andrea Dandolo, “Chronica per extensum descripta,” ed. E. Pastorello, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, ed. Ludovico Antonio Muratori (Bologna, 1941-49), vol. XII, 313.

della Moneta”). Other scholars think that this name has to do with the existence of an ancient Mint on the embankments⁴.

From the outset, the new bridge of 1264 was open to everybody: noblemen, citizens, and foreigners; it was thus common property, and in that sense could indeed be seen as a gesture of equity, almost the fulfilment of civic duty (Fig. 2.1, 2.2).

The unification of a city hitherto divided into two parts is an important feature of the growth of Venice in the Middle Ages. In the historiographical tradition that links the bridge to Doge Sebastiano Ziani, its construction was related to the aristocratic legitimization of the government of the Republic. The builder of the bridge, Barettier, was the same master who had earlier erected the two columns from Constantinople on St. Mark’s Square: these were thus projects that demonstrated a skill for ingenious structures, both symbols of the greatness of Venice’s maritime and commercial empire.

In the *Capitolare* (registers) of the *Ufficiali sopra Rialto* (the Officers of the Rialto), maintenance of the bridge (*lo fato del ponte della riva dela moneta*) is mentioned as one of the duties of the magistrates starting in the middle of the 13th century⁵. The officials were charged with the care and maintenance of the afore-mentioned bridge (*cura e salvation del dito ponte*)⁶. On the right side of the city, however, the new *insula* was not yet fully formed: for a long period there was only a slaughter-house and the first few residences built by the Gradenigo and Orio families in the 11th century after the creation of the market. The two parishes of San Giovanni and San Matteo emerged only in the 13th century⁷.

The urban situation at the end of the 11th century and for the following hundred years maintained polycentric and discontinuous settlements on the two embankments of the ancient river (the Grand Canal), although there is evidence of an increasing tendency toward the expansion of the residential nuclei and the progressive unification of the two parts (Fig. 2.3, 2.4).

The system of the street networks that evolved was simple: each island had a center with a church and a square (*campo*) on a canal (*rivo*), and private streets (*calli*) linked the *Mansiones* of the church’s founders; a

⁴ Paolo Morachiello, “Le rovine del vecchio ponte,” in *Rialto. Le fabbriche e il ponte*, ed. Donatella Calabi and Paolo Morachiello (Turin: Einaudi, 1987), 173-85.

⁵ ASV, *Capitolare degli Ufficiali sopra Rialto*, 6.

⁶ Andrea Dandolo, “Chronicon,” X, 6, 37, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, ed. Ludovico Antonio Muratori, vol. XII, 372.

⁷ Roberto Cessi and Annibale Alberti, *Rialto. L’isola, il ponte, il mercato* (Bologna, 1934), 9-17.

single street linked one *confinium* to the next, usually on the other side of a canal. The only existing connection between San Marco and Rialto was the public continuation of the *Mercerie*, the main public street after 1160, a street which had become ducal property in 1114 (for the part of it called *Mercerie dell'Orologio*). There were few public streets, or *viae majores*.

The creation of a system of magistrates devoted to public works and to the control of private initiatives was rather late (1124: *pro ripis et pro viis publicis et pro viis de canali*). Their responsibilities, covering all the networks of streets, even private ones, began in 1268, while the *Collegio* of the three *Judices supra Publicis* (Magistrates of the Public Domain), responsible for the recognition of the rights of land- and water-ownership, began in 1282. Even the bridges were private institutions: they were mainly wooden structures for the land traffic between one *confinium* and another, and gave access to the houses located on a canal or on a water basin. Only at the end of the 13th century did the construction and the maintenance of the bridges, and participation in their expenses by those involved, require communal authorization. By 1267, there was an office *ad aptandum pontes* (for the management of bridges) in Venice⁸.

The principal bridge for the renewal of the city was of course the Rialto: but unfortunately there is almost no documentation of the original structure. It may be surmised, however, that the first Rialto Bridge was built on boats, and, as noted above, it was probably constructed between 1200 and 1250, as there is no documentation between 1173 and the end of the 12th century⁹. By 1277, however, the *Maggior Consiglio* forbade any kind of boat to stop and sell wine or other products near the bridge¹⁰, thus confirming the existence of such a structure. It also became necessary to enhance the flow of pedestrian traffic, to block the use of space on the bridge for private purposes, and prevent excessive weight on the wooden structure. In July 1293 the *Ufficiali sopra Rialto* were charged with keeping the bridge empty of shops and stands, and closing it with a key, so that it could not be opened without their permission. Although there

⁸ Waldimiro Dorigo, *Venezia romanica* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, 2003), vol. I, 162-65.

⁹ Donatella Calabi and Paolo Morachiello, eds., *Rialto. Le fabbriche e il ponte* (Turin: Einaudi, 1987), 175.

¹⁰ ASV (Archivio di Stato di Venezia, hereafter cited only as ASV), *Ufficiali sopra Rialto*, now in *Provveditori al sale*, b. 2, R. Capitolare 2B, cap. 48, c. 5 v.

were abuses, the magistrates could now impose a toll for passage over the bridge intended as a maintenance fund¹¹.

In 1310 there was a conspiracy in Venice in which the conspirators went over the bridge to get to San Marco Square (and thus attack the city government), but, once defeated, they passed over the bridge again to conceal themselves in a doctor's home in Rialto. In their retreat, the conspirators opened the drawbridge to stop their pursuers¹². The fact that the bridge could be opened and closed, in this instance, symbolizes the important role of the bridge as a safeguard of the government against the enemies of the Republican state.

The bridge had no balustrade or railing, and shops were not permitted on it, but small-scale trade occurred nonetheless. With the decision of 1287 to clear the square and the *loggia* near the bridge on the Rialto market side—from the market porticoes as far as the stairs of the bridge—and to create Rialto Nuovo as an extension of the market, access to and use of the bridge could more easily be controlled¹³. A few years later, temporary commerce and beggars were prohibited from the market and the bridge¹⁴. But in Venice rigor was always mitigated by pity, and soon permits for these activities were again issued by the magistrates. In 1309 the Signoria instituted rules that permitted foreigners to sell grain, flour, vegetables and imported goods as long as these merchants sold the items themselves (not at a stand owned by others)¹⁵. These resolutions were confirmed again in 1317, 1324 and 1332. We know that in order to avoid these prohibitions some Venetians acquired homes in Mestre so that they could qualify as “foreigners” and be able to sell their goods on the bridge¹⁶. The aim of this legislation was to keep the central spaces clear and ordered for an easy passage across the bridge.

The inability of the magistrates to enforce rigid regulations on the use of the space of the bridge and market led in time to more liberal legislation. But at the same time, the physical structure of the bridge was weakening. Although no major repairs were undertaken, as with any old edifice maintenance must have been important. Unfortunately, we don't

¹¹ Roberto Cessi, ed., “Deliberazioni del Maggior Consiglio”, in *Atti delle Assemblee costituzionali italiane dal medio evo al 1831* (Bologna: Forni, 1970-71) vol. III, 346, record for July 1293.

¹² G. A. Avogadro, in *Archivio Veneto* (1871), vol. II, 216-17.

¹³ Roberto Cessi, ed., “Deliberazioni del Maggior Consiglio”, vol. III, 206, 22 June 1288.

¹⁴ ASV, *Capitolare degli Ufficiali sopra Rialto*, cap. 48.

¹⁵ ASV, *Maggior Consiglio, Presbiter*, c. 67, 23 October 1309.

¹⁶ ASV, *Capitolare degli Ufficiali sopra Rialto*, 5 May 1332, 149.