



The War of the Fists: Popular Culture and Public Violence in Late Renaissance Venice

Robert C. Davis

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The War of the Fists is a study of seventeenth-century worker culture in the city of Venice, focusing on the mock battles, or *battagliole*, which the town's two popular factions waged on public bridges. These "little battles" were partly festive battle, partly sport, and partly thinly veiled plebeian mayhem: they could involve as many as a thousand fighters on each side and attracted crowds of thirty thousand or more. Their importance in the city's plebeian life makes bridge battles an extremely valuable point of entry for exploring structures of Venetian popular culture, a task which Robert Davis attempts at four levels: the social geography of Venetian factionalism; the combat itself, and its relationship to social culture; the festive world which grew up around the encounters; and the response of Venice's patrician state to this largely uncontrollable worker celebration.

From the study there emerges a popular world often surprisingly rich: with plebeian honor, status, and neighborhood loyalties that flourished in parallel and sometimes in competition with a patrician domination of urban life at the city's geographic center. In a sense, these encounters represented popular culture "in the making," as Venice's marginal classes fashioned out of apparent chaos the ritual structures they needed to satisfy social needs that otherwise went unmet in their aristocratic state.

As a microhistory that uses Venetian bridge battles as a key to understanding many facets of popular society, *The War of the Fists* will be of interest to social historians and historical anthropologists, as well as historians of urban society, gender, workers, sports, social geography, popular art and culture, and the absolutist state.

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