INDUSTRY AND PRODUCTION IN THE VENETIAN TERRAFERMA
(15TH–18TH CENTURIES)

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In the last 30 years of Venetian historiography, few areas have attracted greater interest than the history of manufactures and commerce in the terraferma, (also referred to as the Veneto) during the early modern period. Indeed, in the space of just a few years, the appearance of a large number of monographs, essays, and articles has visibly augmented our knowledge of the field; a flowering of new and original research that has permitted historians to re-evaluate well-established interpretations that had gone unchallenged for decades.

For many years, in fact, Venice’s undisputed leadership of the region in both commercial activity and various industrial sectors had led scholars to concentrate their attention almost exclusively on the Dominante and to avoid bringing their analyses to bear (if not incidentally or with brief references) on the terraferma. Yet, as the most recent studies have demonstrated, this region appears as one of the most densely populated and prosperous areas in all of Europe in the early modern centuries, with a degree of urbanization among the highest of its time. Moreover, this zone was characterized by a considerably articulate and varied presence of industrial activity.

In the pages that follow, after a quick reconstruction of the lively historiographical debate regarding the development of manufactures in the “stato da terra,” attention will focus particularly, though not exclusively, on the most pivotal sector of the Venetian economy between the 15th and 18th century: textiles. Analysis will touch not only those aspects linked to production but also questions regarding commercial activity and the placement for sale in various markets of the manufactures produced in both the cities and the smaller centers of the terraferma.

The Historiographical Debate

The mainly erudite studies produced between the end of the 19th century and 1950s and 1960s all painted an abysmal picture of economic conditions in the Veneto at the beginning of the early modern period, suggesting
that wool-working, the primary sector of urban manufacturing, had gone into an irreversible crisis by the 15th century, if not previously with the onset of Venetian domination.¹ Not even those studies on the role of industry in support of Venetian 16th-century economic prosperity, conducted from the 1950s and thanks to which the Republic’s capital was attributed the status of a great manufacturing center, had the effect of stimulating a deeper interest in the terraferma. In fact, the latter ended up being singled out even more clearly as an exclusively agricultural and rural periphery which provided the Serenissima with raw materials and food supplies and filled via emigration the demographic voids created by the plague in Venetian workshops and fondaci.²

It was only with Bruno Caizzi’s wide-ranging investigation of manufacturing in the Venetian Republic during the 18th century that historians first identified a group (in truth, a quite limited group) of areas, urban centers, and individual dynamic enterprises that were innovative and growing and which stood out from a landscape otherwise dominated by decadence, conservatism, and the defense of consolidated interests and privileged groups. In this case, the growth of wool production in the foothills of Vicenza and Treviso and, more generally, the shift in the production of manufactures from urban centers to the countryside were greeted as the overcoming of a vestigial barrier from the late medieval past and a necessary condition for the affirmation of novel systems of production and labor relationships and the beginning of processes of technological innovation. According to this vision, the passage from the urban guild system to rural manufacturing implied the destruction of the system of economic institutions inherited from the Renaissance, and this, in turn, opened the way in the region’s more advanced areas for the affirmation of the factory system. Indeed, Caizzi opens his study with a chapter entitled “The Weight of Tradition,” in which the author reviews all the factors that impeded the development of the 18th-century Veneto, from “guild

¹ Giovan Batitsta Zanazzo, L’arte della lana a Vicenza (secoli XIII–XV) (Venice, 1914); Michele Lecce, Vicende dell’arte della lana e della seta a Verona dalle origini al XVI secolo (Verona, 1955); Maria Borgherini, L’arte della lana in Padova durante il governo della Repubblica di Venezia, 1405–1797 (Venice, 1964).