

**Claire Judde de Larivière.** *La révolte des boules de neige.* Paris: Fayard (Hachette Book Group), 2014. 368 pp. EUR 22.00, cloth, ISBN 978-2-213-67814-6.



**Reviewed by** Thomas Cohen (York University, Toronto)

**Published on** H-Italy (October, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Maartje van Gelder (University of Amsterdam)

With this book Claire Judde de Larivière offers us a handsome microhistory about a curious event on Murano. The story goes as follows: On January 27, 1511, when Venice installed a new *podestà* to preside over the island's governance, after the placid ceremony's usual end, as officials left the church countless snowballs flew, pelting Vitale Vituri, the outgoing official. Campanile bells clattered out rebellion; youngsters and, perhaps, grown men sang subversive chants or jeered and hooted; and the victim and his entourage, in chilly darkness, fled back to Venice, bombarded still, in an open gondola. A revolt? Perhaps, but barely; and then, on the island, and shortly later, in court on Murano and then in Venice, very little came of it. The muffled nature of that outcome, as much as the event itself, is the subject, and indeed the question, of this book. Or, said better, the pair of questions. First, just whatever *was* that event that indeed did happen on that snowy night? And, second, why so much, and then so little? In the large, Judde de Larivière argues, this revolt, if revolt it was, was destined to belittlement and grate-

ful oblivion, as Venice rushed to conserve its stabilizing myth of social and political tranquility. So courts and councils had good motive to see little more to the evening's doings than a lot of flying snow.

So why make so much of so little? Now this is a microhistory, and, as all know, microhistory's custom is to magnify the small, the better to see large lessons. And, by the habits of this genre, these lessons are always double, first internal and then external. The internal lesson comes thanks to magnification. By climbing inside a moment, a person, or an object or procedure well ensconced and utterly entangled in its world, the scholar works out the fine structure, the complex internal mechanisms, the impulses, bargains, and emotions that gave shape and meaning to the subject of research. The external lesson arises from the scholar's campaign to lodge the moment, person, thing, or process, now well described and thoroughly understood, in the larger structures of its

time and place. What then of this snowball moment?

Judde de Larivière's book seems to my eye less given to the internal question than are many microhistories. That fact may owe to a weakness in the documents: the tribunal that investigated the event left only twenty folios of interrogations; many microhistories batten off a dossier far thicker and far richer in details. For whatever reason, whether she could not, or just chose not to, the author offers what is for microhistory a fairly thin description of the fine texture of what went on. Meanwhile, the external question—how did this event sit in larger things?—brings her to a rich, enlightening discussion. This fight was in its way, she argues, if not utterly overdetermined, at least as thoroughly shaped by its time and social-cultural place as was ever any well-crafted snowball by mischievous and cunning young Murano hands.

To make her case for context and determination, Judde de Larivière first sets sights on the island, with its population of market-gardeners, fishermen, and glass-makers, some of them long-time residents and others immigrants from the either the mainland or the Adriatic. She wants us readers to have good Local Knowledge, so she Thickens the Description. The author makes elegant use of the archival record to bring the island economy to life, mustering resonant lists of active trades and of goods sold in the markets. She has used the papers cleverly, catching hints that let her know the island in rich and subtle ways, and the writing does a handsomely openhanded job of showing readers how a scholar might acquire such understanding.

One theme, throughout the book's clear argument, is political subordination. Murano is not entirely master of itself, and its inhabitants, most of them, are not full masters of their political fate. The snowball moment, whatever it was, expressed rebellion, or indignation, against an official imposed by the metropolis across the wave-chopped channel. Nevertheless, in Judde de Larivière's

eyes, the islanders, even the poor and the young and the women, are not scholarship's familiar mere subalterns, restricted to weapons of the weak. Rather, as she sees them, they are eternally and assertively political and deeply involved in a many-layered, incessant, subtly emergent life of civic action, expressed in countless ways on many scales and levels. I find this position very plausible; it certainly sits snugly with the Romans I study. Italian politics and social life, in the widest, most eclectic sense of "politics," mingled everywhere. The author's vision here mixes structure with process, privileging the latter—the less formal—always in restless dialogue with the more crystallized institutions laid out by statutes and by custom.

Meanwhile, the islanders do have their local structures, and, although mere minutes from Venice itself, they inhabit a subject territory, with its semi-autonomous internal institutions and its outsider, the *podestà*, who runs justice and administers the island colony. Much of Murano's dependency runs through him. There comes the question, never resolved: to what degree did these snowballs address the man they pelted, and to what degree did they fly, instead, at the mother city that hovered over Murano and called on its resources?

The times themselves shape the event. In the small, it is Carnival, the prime season for obstreperous behavior. But, in the large and far more importantly, Venice is rough-tossed and tested severely in the War of the League of Cambrai. Having lost badly at Agnadello, it has been impressing boats and fishermen to supply its struggling armies. And the Lagoon islands are awash in refugees from the mainland. The stresses of the war color the local regime and make its hand lie heavier on the island. Still, we never learn what it was about *podestà* Vitale Vitturi that made him unpopular with the inhabitants of Murano. Nothing in his personality or his actions sets him out as odious or contemptible. He himself, and his con-

duct, are among the several odd mysteries at the center of the story.

One of the best parts of the book is the description, blow by blow, of a lively, contested election, three years earlier, of the parish priest for Santi Maria e Donato, the island's chief church. Here we have the thick description the snowball fight itself does not receive. It is a brilliant account of all the passions, bluster, legal shenanigans, and skullduggery that went into a hard-fought but probably "normal-exceptional" electoral meeting. The connection here with the main story is only tenuous; the tale serves to show off the political alertness and busy entanglement of island life. Sadly, we can see this parish wrangle far more clearly than we can discern the alert discussions in island council after the snowball event.

After January's insurrection came February's investigation, carried out by the Avogadori de Commun. It ended in April with acquittals all around. The author argues that one job of a tribunal, always, is to make a fitting story, and that Venice, committed as it was to a myth of peace, had good reason to see even less in the little uprising than was ever there. Then comes a puzzle for the author: if the court wanted the suspects to come out innocent, why then did it torture all of them (except the town crier, already freed)? She gives no good answer. I ask, might the court have tortured not in pursuit of a confession, as the author assumes, but out of confidence that the suspects would stand fast and thereby, thanks to having withstood the pain, help firm up the prosecution's desired failure? In early modern Italian courts, pro-forma torture on a witness's behalf did happen.

The book has one flaw not easily corrected: it lacks the original Latin and Italian of the sources. Fayard has aimed for sales: big print, lots of white on every page, and spare, lean notes to suppress both weight and price. But Fayard and mass market are not alone here; there is a general pressure among publishers to strip bare the notes, and, of

course, to banish them to the back as if they barely mattered. But few historians so depend on close and careful readings of shades of meaning as do microhistorians. Judde de Larivière does offer snatches of the original, but mostly we have to trust her French translations, and from what I do see of the original, or just know of the old habits of the language, I am aware that she sometimes slips (the *iocularius*, on p. 192, probably makes jewelry, and not eyeglasses, the *publico homicida* is not an assassin *public*--whatever that expression means--but rather, a man with a wide public reputation as a killer). Even the most adroit translator, in a book like this, would do best, if possible, by showing critical readers, experts especially but eager amateurs as well, the originals on which so much argument rests.

In sum, this is a book of many virtues, among them lively style, an eye for local color, a good feel for the tangled social and political world of early modern Venice, and a canny sense of the latest good historical theory. It has many graces and few flaws. Most Italians can read the French already. If it ever aimed for translation into Italian, English, or other languages, I would recommend revision too, to weed out a few errors and, if possible, to snuggle closer to that snowball fight itself, the riddle wrapped in a mystery at the very center of the book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

**Citation:** Thomas Cohen. Review of Judde de Larivière, Claire, *La révolte des boules de neige*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42990>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.