



ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper is to investigate Timbuktu's economic decline in the three centuries elapsed between 1526, when Leo Africanus reached the Mysterious City, and 1830, when the first European explorers arrived in Timbuktu. It is argued that Timbuktu's decline was neither an accident nor the result of inevitable natural conditions. Timbuktu's decay was the product of historical and social forces. Specifically, it is argued that Timbuktu lost power and prestige because its market decayed. However, it is also suggested that no single factor can account individually for this event. The crisis of Timbuktu's market was provoked

by the interaction of two factors: first, the general decline of Mediterranean trade resulting from the emergence of the new Trans-Oceanic trade, and the crisis of the system's component parts at the individual level, and their inability to function as a system; and second, the institutional decay which followed the fall of the Songhai empire, which made Trans-Saharan trade particularly risky and, henceforth, economically inefficient. Building on this, the paper ends on a methodological note as it underlines the theoretical inability of monocausal explanations to capture the inherent complexity of social phenomena.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper is a study of development which differs from other such studies in two major respects. First, rather than analyzing what factors have promoted the development of a previously underdeveloped area, I will try to assess what factors may lead to the decline of a previously highly developed area. In doing so, I will try to show that development is fragile and precarious, because it depends on both domestic/institutional and international/economic factors and conditions.

Second, this study differs from most other studies of development because instead of focusing on modern events, I will devote my attention to a rather small sub-region of Western Africa between 1526, when Leo Africanus¹ visited Timbuktu and described it as one of the richest cities he had seen in his travels, and 1830, when Rene Caillié noted that Timbuktu was "nothing but a mass of ill-looking houses, built of earth" (Caillié 1830:49).

There are several reasons why I decided to utilize Timbuktu's history as a case study: I focus on Timbuktu because its decay can be used to test competing explanatory models and, most importantly, because it can be used to show that Timbuktu's decline was neither an accident nor the result of inevitable natural

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¹ The name of Leo Africanus was Al-Hassan Ibn-Mohammed Al-Wesaz Al-Fasi. He was then baptised as Giovanni Leoni, and he is known generally as Leo Africanus. His name was translated into English as John Leo.

conditions. Timbuktu's decay was the product of clear historical (social) forces and as such it needs to be analyzed. Specifically, I will argue that Timbuktu decayed when it lost, with the decline of its commercial activities, the source of its wealth. In the present paper, it will be suggested that this outcome was produced by the interaction of two factors: the decline of the Mediterranean trade system on which Timbuktu's trade was dependent, and the demise of the efficient economic organization and institutions following the fall of the Songhai empire.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section provides a theoretical justification for my research, i.e. why it is worth investigating the determinants of Timbuktu's economic decay. The second section places Timbuktu's economic decay in historical perspective by analyzing the memoirs of Arab and European travelers who have visited Timbuktu. This discussion allows me to localize the timing of Timbuktu's decline. Building upon this discussion, the third section of the paper addresses the determinants of Timbuktu's wealth. It will be argued that Timbuktu's wealth was mainly generated by the intense activity of its market, where Western Sudanese goods were exchanged for the commodities brought from North Africa and also for the goods brought from the near-forest and the forest-land in the South. In the fourth section, I will argue that the economic decay of Timbuktu is associated with, and I believe caused by, the decay of its market, which was promoted by the interaction of both international/economic and domestic/institutional factors. In the fifth and final section, I will assess what lessons can be learned from the experience of Timbuktu.

THE MYSTERIOUS TIMBUKTU AND ITS MYSTERIOUS DECAY

Timbuktu has often been referred to as to the mysterious city, as its location, name² and origins³ have long been unknown to the European powers. Yet, none

² In a letter written by Antoine Malfante and addressed to Giovanni Mariono at Genoa in 1447, Timbuktu is called Tambet or Thambet. Thambet is also the name used by Ca Da Mosto in his "Voyages of Cadamosto, who also adopts the name Tambucutu and Tanbutu. Gerald Roe Crone, in his introduction to the 1937 English edition of *The Voyages of Cadamosto* (Crone, 1937: xii) noted that in a Catalan Atlas made for Charles V by Abraham Cresques in 1375 Timbuktu was referred to as Tenbuch. A few years later, Diogo Gomes called it Tambucutu. When Pory translated Leo Africanus's *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Thing Therein Contained* in 1600 (Africanus 1896), the name of the city was translated as Tombuto. Yet, René Caillié in his *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo and Across the Great Desert to Morocco*, (Caillié 1830) prefers the word Timbuctoo, and Heinrich Barth used alternatively the diction Timbúktu and Timbu'ktu in his *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* (Barth 1965 [1857]). The best example of this *confusio linguarum* is represented by William Allen's *Narrative of*

the Expedition to the Niger (London, Bentley, 1848) in which the author used several variant names. In fact, Allen used the diction Tomboktu in the map prepared for his book, the diction Timbuktu in the Index of his book (p.1), the diction Tombutto in the discussion of Leo Africanus's work (p.6), and both Timbaktú (p.8) and Timbaktuh (pp. 16-17) in the discussion of the works of Lang and Caillié. Interestingly enough, the name of Timbuktu was a mystery not only for the Western explorers and travelers, but it was a mystery also for some of the native populations. In the third footnote on page 6 of his book, Allen makes the following remark "it is curious that one of our interpreters, Mohamed Lamina, said he knew two large cities, Timbaktu and Tombuttu, and the latter was very much larger than the other". Nowadays, the mysterious city is called Timbuktu in English, Tombouctou in French and Timbuctu in Italian.

³ The mystery surrounding the proper spelling of the name of the city would not be of particular interest, if it were not associated with the mystery concerning the origins of name and, in the end, of Timbuktu itself. What are the origins of the name Timbuktu? Even in this respect, our knowledge is far from being unshakably certain. In fact, if we reject, as Cissoko suggests, Miner's argument that the meaning of Timbuktu "is purported to be 'the woman of the big navel'" (Miner 1965:4-5) we are then left with three major etymological and historical interpretations of Timbuktu's name. Leo Africanus believed that the name of the city and the city itself were of Songhai origins as he argued that "the name Tombuto (was) imposed on the kingdom from the name of a town so called which (they say) king Mansa Suleiman founded in the yeere of the Hegeira 610" (1896:824). If this were true, the story told by Mohamed Lamina would not be as surprising as it sounded to Allen's ears. This said, according to Leo Africanus the name Timbuktu is made up of two components: *tin* (wall) and *buktu* and it means, henceforth, the wall of Buktu. Unfortunately, Leo Africanus does not resolve the most interesting aspect of the puzzle, i.e. who or rather what is this *buktu*. The belief that Timbuktu and its name had a Songhai origin was also shared by Heinrich Barth, who suggested that "the original form of the name was the Songhai form Tumbutu, from whence the Imóshagh made Tumbýtku, which was afterwards changed by the Arabs into Tombuktu" (1965[1857]: 284). According to Barth "the town was probably so called, because it was built originally in a hollow or cavity in the sand hills. Tumbuto means hole or womb in the Songhai language: if it were a Temáshight word, it would be written Tinbuktu. The name is generally interpreted by Europeans *well* of Buktu, but *tin* has nothing to do with well" (Barth 1965: 284-285 footnote). In addition to this interpretive line, that identifies Timbuktu as a Songhai word, Cissoko (1996) recalls that some scholars have suggested that the name Timbuktu has a Berber origin and was imposed upon the city by its Tuareg founders. If this interpretation is believed, then the word Timbuktu is made up of two parts: *tim* feminine form of *In*, which means "place of" and *bouctou*, which is a contraction of the Arab word *nekba* (small dune). Timbuktu would then mean "place covered by small dunes" (Cissoko 1996:19). A third interpretive line holds that Timbuktu was founded by the Tuareg as their summer camp. This interpretation is suggested by Es-Sadi in his *Tarikh Es-Sudan*, where he wrote that "in the beginning it was there that travelers arriving by land and water met. They made it the depot for their utensils and grain. Soon this place became a cross-roads of travelers who passed back and forth through it. They entrusted their property to a slave called Timbuctoo, word that, in the language of those countries means the old" (Es-Sadi 1981:35-36). It is interesting to note, as Hodes noted in his 1898 translation of *Tariks Es-Sudan* that "this etymology would indicate that the Tuareg would not have designed this town with a name belonging to their own language" (Es-Sadi 1981:36). Modern historiography has suggested that the second and the third interpretations should be preferred to the first one, because there seems to be archeological evidence of Timbuktu's Tuareg origins (July, 1970). Yet, this evidence does not provide sufficient evidence to decide whether the second interpretation is to be preferred to the third or whether our preferences should be ranked the other way around.

of these mysteries is as mysterious, interesting and intriguing—for the social scientist—as the fall of Timbuktu, i.e. as the process that transformed Timbuktu from one of the wealthiest cities of the Middle Age into the dusty city encountered by European explorers in the early 19th century.

Why did Timbuktu decay? The literature has emphasized the role of three main factors. The first factor is represented by the transformation of the climatic conditions that made Trans-Saharan trade more difficult and, hence, had a negative impact on Timbuktu's commercial activities.⁴ The exhaustion of the extractive capacity of the goldmines in the region also had a negative impact on Timbuktu's trade, as gold trade represented a considerable portion of Timbuktu's commercial transaction.⁵ The exhaustion of the extractive capacity represents the second factor harming Timbuktu's economy. The third contributing factor is the collapse of the third major empire in the region, i.e. the Songhai empire, which was defeated by the Moroccans in 1591.

Important as these factors may have been, they do not provide, however, a satisfactory explanation of Timbuktu's decay. The climatic explanation is not entirely satisfactory, because, in spite of climatic changes travelers and explorers were still crossing the Sahara with some ease, as shown by the successful expedition of the Moroccans in 1591. Similarly, the crisis of Timbuktu is not adequately explained by the exhaustion of the extractive capacity in the region for two separate though related reasons: Timbuktu's economy was mostly commercial and not industrial (or productive) and gold was only one of the various commodities exchanged on the Timbuktu's market. In this respect, it is well to recall that salt was as an important as gold for Timbuktu's trade, and very important were also Tortoise shell, ivory and ostrich (Davidson 1991).⁶ Finally the decay of Timbuktu cannot even be conceived as a necessary or inevitable consequence of the fall of the Songhai empire, because Timbuktu managed to survive successfully not only the fall of the Ghana empire, which created the conditions for the rise of the Mali empire, but also the fall of the Mali empire itself. This second event is of particu-

⁴ That the climatic conditions in Western Sudan underwent a profound change has recently been suggested by James Curry (1999:160-161). Note that there is no unanimous agreement on the point. For example Davidson (1991:72), argued that the climatic conditions in the region remained fairly stable over time and that climatic changes were rather negligible.

⁵ This point, which had been originally made by Oskar Lenz (1886:153), was more recently proposed by Mauny (1954).

⁶ July (1970:59) also emphasizes the importance of the spices, copper and slaves trade.

lar importance, because in the first years of the Songhai empire, Timbuktu suffered persecutions at the hands of the Songhai empire's builder, Sunny Ali.⁷ And yet, neither the fall of two empires nor Sunny Ali's persecutions represented a serious threat for Timbuktu. Timbuktu's previous ability to survive instability and related difficulties makes it rather unclear why the fall of the Songhai empire would "inevitably" lead to Timbuktu's decay.

In sum, what has been said so far suggests that the wealth of Timbuktu was certainly not fostered by any of the above mentioned factors nor by their combination, but it also suggests that their loss does not entirely account for Timbuktu's decay. The purpose of the present paper is to integrate the previous explanations by suggesting that Timbuktu's decline was, to a large extent, the consequence of the interaction of domestic/institutional and international/economic factors.

TRAVELS TO TIMBUKTU: THE STORIES OF THE ARAB AND EUROPEAN EXPLORERS

We know that after its foundation Timbuktu experienced major economic development, and it remained a major economic center for about three centuries, i.e. from the 13th up to the mid of the 16th century. We know this with some certainty because after Ibn Battuta wrote about the wealth of Timbuktu (that he had visited in 1355) during one of his travels, the wealth, the power and the richness of Timbuktu were mentioned also by Cadamosto and, later on, by Leo Africanus who reached the Mysterious City in 1526. In that year, Timbuktu was so developed that Leo Africanus could write "here are great stores of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountyfully maintained at the kings cost and charges. And hither are brought divers manuscripts or written bookes out of Barbarie, which are sold for more money than any other merchandize" (1896:825). As Leo Africanus noted, and several contemporary historians have repeated, Timbuktu was not just a very wealthy and highly cultured city. Timbuktu was also militarily strong. Leo Africanus is our source of information, even in this respect, with his observation that the king of Timbuktu "hath alwaies three thousands of horsemen, and a great number of footmen that shoot poysoned arrows, attending upon him" (1896:825).

After this we have a black out of roughly three centuries, which ended in the 1820's with the expedition of Major Lang, followed by Caillié's voyage in 1828, by that of Barth in 1853-54 and that of Haywood whose memoires were pub-

⁷ On this aspect, see at least July (1970:56, 59).

lished in 1912. These accounts tell us of some encounters between the European explorers and the Mysterious City, encounters characterized by satisfaction and surprise. The account given by Caillié deserves to be quoted at some length: "at length, we arrived safely at Timbuctoo, just as the sun was touching the horizon. I now saw this capital of the Sudan, to reach which had so long been the object of my wishes. On entering this mysterious city, which is an object of curiosity and research to the civilized nations of Europe, I experienced an indescribable satisfaction. I never before felt a similar emotion and my transport was extreme... I looked around and found that the sight before me, did not answer my expectations. I had formed a totally different idea of the grandeur and wealth of Timbuctoo. The city presented, at first view, nothing but a mass of ill-looking houses, built of earth" (1830:49). The day after Mister Caillié, after paying the due respects to his host, took a tour of the city. His impressions were not much better than the one he had received "at first sight." In his tour of the city, he noted, "I found it neither so large nor so populous as I had expected. Its commerce is not so considerable as fame reported (1830:50). At the time of Caillié's visit, Timbuktu had "at most about ten and twelve thousands inhabitants" (1830:56). Timbuktu was not even the shadow of its past glory. In sum, although we still ignore the causes of Timbuktu's decay, we know that it must be temporally localized between the visit of Leo Africanus and the visit of Caillié. These three centuries are the temporal *ort*, the *locus*, the place in which Timbuktu's decay occurs. Yet, the temporal localization of the crisis does not provide an explanation and the puzzle for the social scientist is, at this point, to discover what were the determinants of this collapse and to assess whether and to what extent scholarly hypotheses and theories help provide an explanation.

THE RISE OF TIMBUKTU

In order to understand what factors are responsible for the decay of Timbuktu, it is necessary to understand what was the basis on which Timbuktu's wealth, power and prestige hinged. In a first approximation, it is possible to say that Timbuktu's wealth and prestige resulted from its being an important trade center. Timbuktu was the market where the Western Sudanese goods could be traded for the goods brought from Northern Africa and it was at the same time the market where Western Sudanese commodities were traded with the goods coming from the near-forest or forest-land in the South. Timbuktu owned its status to its commercial activities.⁸

⁸ On the point see, Curtin et al. (1978:93)

The wealth generated in Timbuktu, as it was previously recalled, created the conditions for the existence and development of a bourgeois culture and a cosmopolitan population. Mansa⁹ Musa developed an important cultural center in Timbuktu, which attracted a very large number of scholars and men of religion, and was considered as important as some of the most renowned European universities. This is consistent with Leo Africanus's remarks on the large market of books and manuscripts in Timbuktu that were previously quoted.

However, knowing that the wealth, the power and the prestige of Timbuktu resulted from its commercial activities, still does not tell us what factors favored the development of Timbuktu into a prominent trade center. No mono-causal explanation can be provided in this respect, since several factors were involved in making Timbuktu develop. Geographic factors certainly played a crucial role in development of Timbuktu's market. Timbuktu was strategically located between the Southern boundary of the Sahara desert, which could be reached using the Trans-Saharan trails, and the northernmost part of the Niger river, which allowed merchants from the South to bring gold and their other commodities to the market. Second, because of its strategic location Timbuktu was not only the closest market for the Southern goods, but it was also the closest market for the salt extracted in Taghaza and Toudení. Finally, because of its strategic location Timbuktu could entertain dense commercial exchanges with the most developed cities in the region, Djenné and Gao.

As important as location may be for the efficient functioning of an economy (Krugman 1997:37–58), the location of Timbuktu was not and could not possibly have simultaneously been a necessary and a sufficient condition for the flourishing of its economic activities. Two other factors were required for the development of the commercial activities: first, the demand for the goods and the commodities produced in Sudan and in the forest-land in the South; and second, the creation of what North and Thomas (1973) call an efficient economic organization.

In the first respect, historical studies have shown that there was a large demand for the Western Sudanese goods, especially gold, ivory and tortoise shell (Davidson 1991:71; July 1970). Western Sudanese goods were in demand in Spain and Morocco in the West as well as in China in the East. The best analysis of the development of Western African trade was elaborated by Davidson, who argued that "the expansion of West African trade dates back to the ninth century. Started by Muslim demand in North Africa and Near east, it increased steadily

⁹ Mansa is generally translated as King, see e.g. July (1970:56). However, a more appropriate translation would be Sultan.

as the cities of Southern Europe embarked on their own expansion after the XII century. West African gold became a staple export to Europe and without it there would have been no general use of gold as medium of exchange in high medieval times" (Davidson 1991:76).

Neo-institutional economists have suggested that the creation of an efficient economic organization is *conditio sine qua non* of economic development. The creation of an efficient economic organization, in turn, requires the creation of the proper economic incentives for economic actors. The efficacy of these economic incentives is due to the fact that they "channel individual economic effort into activities that bring the private rate of return close to the social rate of return" (North and Thomas 1973:1). Property rights are among those institutions that make acceptable to risk private resources for social gains. In the Trans-Saharan trade, the enforcement of property rights reduced the costs of commerce and increased its extent. The only major departure between the Western Sudanese history and the analysis of North and Thomas (1973) is represented by who enforces the property rights. This task, which according to North and Thomas (1973) should be performed by the state, in the case of Trans-Saharan trade was performed by the various empires¹⁰ that ruled in the area and by the Islam. Several travelers, including, Ibn Battuta and Leo Africanus were greatly impressed by the relative safety of crossing the desert. The interaction of these three factors favored the economic development¹¹ of Timbuktu and of its neighboring cities, including those that are now lost or forgotten.¹²

¹⁰ The two empires I am referring to are the Empire of Mali and, in its wake, the Songhai Empire.

¹¹ If innovation, economies of scale, education, capital accumulation, etc. "are not causes of growth; they *are* growth" (North and Thomas, 1973:2), then one of the most evident aspects of the economic development of Timbuktu and the neighboring area is represented by remarkable increase in the number of Trans-Saharan trails and wells. In the first respect, it is possible to note that in contrast to the past, when the Berbers were using mainly two Trans-Saharan trails (a westward one from Morocco to Mauritania; and a southward one from the Fezzan to the Middle Niger and Lake Chad), many more trails were used by the growing Trans-Saharan trade. In the second respect, it is possible to recall that the increase in the number of wells was realized by digging again the old wells and also by making new wells. On this and related aspects, see Davidson (1991:71).

¹² In this respect, the case of Audogast is emblematic. This city, which had been a major city in Sudan at least from the tenth century, today is just, to quote Davidson (1991:76), nothing more than "a puzzle for archeologists". Similarly, the city of Kumbi, which was the largest city of Western Sudan with a population of about 20,000 inhabitants today is just "a mark on the Kaarta region—200 hundred miles in the Southern fringe of the desert from Bamako" (Davidson 1991: 76), the capital of Mali. On this, see Basil Davidson, *Africa in history. Themes and Outlines*, New York, Collier, 1991; see also Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 1987.

It is interesting to note that economic development in Timbuktu paved the way to the emergence of a commercial bourgeois class, of cultural institutions and the accumulation of both capital and social capital. These transformations, in turn, furthered the process of development in the region. Yet, it is even more interesting to note that none of these socioeconomic transformations can be invoked to explain the decay of Timbuktu. Nonetheless, the wealthy and cultured Timbuktu decayed in spite of all its resources. The purpose of the next section is to discuss some of the factors, or rather, *the* factors that determined the fall of Timbuktu.

THE FALL OF TIMBUKTU AND ITS CAUSES

Why did Timbuktu decay? Timbuktu decayed because it lost the very source of its wealth and prestige: Timbuktu lost its status of leading trading center. What is important to determine is why Timbuktu lost its status of major international/economic market.

In this respect, it is possible to note that the decline of Timbuktu's market and, therefore, Timbuktu's crisis, are intimately connected, and, I suggest, are caused by a the interaction of two factors. The first factor is represented by the crisis of the Mediterranean trade system, on which Timbuktu's market was dependent, while the second factor is represented by the demise of those institutions that had made Trans-Saharan trade an efficient enterprise during the Songhai empire.

In the first respect, we may recall that Timbuktu was part of a trading system which was centered on/around the Mediterranean sea and the Mediterranean trade (Fage 1988: 216–218). As July aptly put it, Timbuktu was part of a trade system and trade routes "which stretched as far as Venice, Genoa and Cairo" (1970:59) and also included Spain and Turkey, or, to be more precise, Istanbul. In other words, Timbuktu's economy was on the semi-periphery¹³ of the Mediterranean economy. The implications of this connection are quite intuit-

¹³ According to Wallerstein (1974), world economies are "divided into core-states and peripheral areas...there are also semiperipheral areas, which are in between the core and the periphery on a series of dimensions, such as the complexity of economic activities, strength of the state machinery, cultural integrity, etc. Some of these areas had been core-areas of earlier versions of a given world-economy. Some had been peripheral areas that were later promoted, so to speak, as a result of the changing geopolitics of an expanding world-economy" (Wallerstein 1974:349). This said, and this is the most relevant aspect for the purposes of the present discussion, Wallerstein also notes that "the semiperiphery, however, is not an artifice of statistical cutting points, nor is it a residual category. The semiperiphery is a necessary structural element in a world economy" (Wallerstein 1974:349).

tive: Timbuktu's fortunes and prosperity were associated with and subordinate to those of the system as a whole, i.e. to the core. The inevitability of this link, and its potentially destructive consequences, became apparent after the discovery of the Americas in 1492 and "the opening of the Southern sea route to the Indies round the Cape of Good Hope" (Glamann 1977:210).

In fact, with the development of these new, trans-oceanic sea-routes European trade (could) "no longer be treated in isolation but (had) to be viewed in a more or less global context" (Glamann 1977:190). With the emergence of the trans-oceanic trade, there occurred what Braudel calls (Braudel 1977:66–67) "a shift of the center of gravity." This transformation was particularly relevant with regard to the Mediterranean trade. In fact, the Mediterranean sea (and trade for that matter) lost its previously hegemonic status as trade started to follow alternative routes.

Although the impact of the Trans-Oceanic trade on the Mediterranean economy was not immediate, its effects were quite evident by the second decade of the seventeenth century (Braudel 1949). Following Braudel, economic historians have, correctly, underlined that the crisis of the Mediterranean powers, most notably Spain and Italy, could not be entirely ascribed to the emergence of the Trans-Oceanic trade. This argument holds true, as it will shortly be demonstrated, also in the case of Timbuktu. However, it is also undoubtedly true that neither the Venetian trade nor that of Timbuktu benefited from the new patterns in international trade.

This said, Timbuktu's trade partners, and Timbuktu itself, were not simply hurt by the fact that Mediterranean trade had lost its previous hegemonic position in the world economy. They were also hurt because the trading system, that resulted from their interaction and in which they had prospered, was rapidly falling apart for two related reasons: first, the crisis of each of the system's component parts; and second, the system's component parts' inability to function as a system. With regard to the first, it is possible to note that the crisis of both Spain and Italy were clear and were clearly illustrated by several socio-economic indicators. First of all, analysis of the demographic trends in Spain has recently suggested that Spanish population either stagnated or diminished in the course of the 17th century (Vives 1970:122–124). In contrast, the Italian population suffered a marked decline in the same century. This decline is well documented in the literature. Table 1 reports demographic trends in eighteen Italian cities from the end of the 16th century to the end of the 17th century. The data show that in ten out of the eighteen cities under study the population declined, though the magnitude of this decline varies from city to city. In this respect, note that while the population dropped by more than 40% in Verona and Catania (respectively by 40.9% and 43%), it declined only by 10.8% in Napoli and by 7.11% in Venice.

Table 1 – Population of Some Italian Cities at the End of the 16th and 17th Century

City	Year	Population	Year	Population
Venezia	1586	148647	1696	138067
Verona	1586	52109	1692	30685
Brescia	1586	42660	1658	40220
Vicenza	1586	21268	1663	25143
Udine	1586	14579	1672	13389
Napoli	1591	209470	1688	186769
Milano	1592	120000	1688	125829
Roma	1600	113760	1700	141784
Firenze	1609	72000	1701	66000
Bologna	1600	62844	1701	63346
Genova	1581	47708	1682	39457
Messina	1583	42004	1713	40393
Ferrara	1601	32860	1704	25500
Catania	1583	28465	1713	16222
Torino	1612	24410	1702	43866
Modena	1591	18001	1683	18025
Reggio Emilia	1591	11137	1697	14803
Livorno	1581	4985	1694	17709

Source: Daniele Beltrami, *Storia della Popolazione di Venezia dalla Fine del Secolo XVI alla Caduta della Repubblica*, Padova, CEDAM, 1954, p. 63 and 65.

On the contrary, the population remained fairly stable in Modena, where it grew from 18,001 inhabitants in 1581 to 18,025 in 1683, while it grew in Vicenza, Milano, Roma, Bologna, Torino, Reggio Emilia and Livorno. It is probably interesting to note that the population declined in all the maritime cities with the exception of Livorno.

The Spanish and Italian data, which show, at best, demographic stagnation and, at worst, depopulation draw a picture of demographic decay in the two Southern European countries. This decay becomes particularly evident, and one should probably say dramatic, when Spanish and Italian demographic trends are compared and contrasted with those of Northern European capitals.

As the end of the 16th century, Venice was the second largest city in Italy after Napoli and it had a larger population than London, Amsterdam and Lisbon. Only Paris, among the European capitals under consideration, was larger than Venice. At the end of the 17th century, the picture has dramatically changed.¹⁴ The Venetian population has declined by slightly more than 7%, while the population

¹⁴ Although our data are considerably different from those presented in Pelizzon (2000: 87-195), they show the same pattern displayed by Pelizzon's data.

Table 2 – Population in Some European Capitals

	Population (year)	Population (year)	Population (year)
London	100000 (1568)	1114644 (1701)	2235344 (1801)
Paris	216000 (1590)	492000 (1700)	548000 (1801)
Amsterdam	40000 (1514)	185000 (1685)	
Lisbona	65000 (1550)	100000 (1600)	175000 (1775)
Venezia	143637 (1586)	138067 (1696)	137240 (1797)

Source: Daniele Beltrami, *Storia della Popolazione di Venezia dalla Fine del Secolo XVI alla Caduta della Repubblica*, Padova, CEDAM, 1965.

has increased in all of the other European capitals. Specifically, during the 17th century the population grew by 1014% in London, by 127% in Paris, by 362.5% in Amsterdam and by 53.8% in Lisbon. The implication of this change is that, at the end of the 17th century, only Lisbon had a smaller population than Venice. Venetian decline continued during the 18th century, so much so Venice was the smallest European capital at the end of that century. Data are reported in Table 2.

This said, it is also worth recalling that the crisis of the previous Mediterranean powers—Spain and Italy—was not just a demographic crisis. It was, above all, a crisis in the industrial/productive activity. This crisis was quite evident both in the Spanish and in the Italian case. Vives (1970:139) illustrates the collapse of the Castilian industry by presenting and discussing the data concerning the “population decline in the old and industrial and mercantile cities of Castile” (1970:139). The decline is truly impressive: from 1594 to 1694 the industrial population in Burgos declined by 29.4%, by 55.2% in Valladolid, by 68.2% in Palencia, by 51.2% in Salamanca, by 65% in Avila, by 70.7% in Segovia and by 54.2% in Toledo. In sum, the population decreased in all major Castilian economic centers. These data are interpreted to reflect the severe economic recession in the region. Data are reported in Table 3.

It is, however, worth noting that the Italian crisis was as severe as the Spanish one. Cipolla (1970) presents very interesting data in this regard. The number of cloths produced in Como fell from an yearly average of 8000 per year to just about 400 cloths a year at the mid of the seventeenth century; in Milano the production of cloths dropped from an yearly average of 15000 cloths at the beginning of the 17th century to a yearly average of about 3000 cloths around 1640; “in Genoa the silk industry was in full decline by the last decade of the sixteenth cen-

Table 3 – Population Decline in the Old Industrial and Mercantile Cities in Castile

	1530	1594	1646	1694
Burgos	1500	2665	600	1881
Valladolid	6750	8112	3000	3637
Palencia	1364	3063	800	972
Salamanca	2459	4953	2965	2416
Avila	1523	2826	1123	965
Segovia	2850	5548		1625
Toledo	5898	10933	5000	5000
Cuenca		3095	800	1641

Source: Jaime Vives, “The decline of Spain in the Seventeenth Century,” in Carlo Maria Cipolla (ed.), *The Economic Decline of Empires*, London, Methuen, 1970, p.139.

tury. A seventeenth century tradition holds that, whereas there had been 18000 silk looms in the territory of the Republic, by 1608 there were only 3000 and scarcely more than 2500 in 1675. The total of 18000 weavers for the middle of the sixteenth century must be considered an exaggeration. However, there can be no doubt that the silk industry did decline during the course of the century” (Cipolla 1970:199).

Among the various data on the Genovese economy presented by Cipolla, the most relevant for the purposes of the present analysis is represented by the fact that the annual value of goods imported and exported by the port dropped from 9 million lire at the beginning of the century to 3 million lire at the end of the century. As dramatic as the recession might appear, we should probably recall that few places in Italy were hit as hard as Venice by the economic crisis. Cipolla (1970:196) showed that the production of cloths dropped by almost ten times in the course of the 17th century. Yet, the Venetian crisis did not simply affect the clothing industry, but it affected every aspect of the Venetian economy. This problem can be highlighted by looking at the number of contracts of Garzoni¹⁵ registered every year. In contrast to the last decade of the sixteenth century, when an average of 1309 contracts were registered, the seventeenth century had an yearly average of about 1174 registered contracts. In other words, there was a drop of more than 10%. Data concerning the number of contracts of Garzoni are presented in Table 4.

In sum, the demographic indicators as well as the industrial indicators consistently show that the economy of two, previously crucial, component parts of

¹⁵ *The contracts of the Garçons.*

Table 4 – Number of Contracts of Garzoni

Year	Contracts
1592	1447
1597	1078
1598	1402
1621	1120
1626	1240
1643	1080
1645	1022
1646	842
1656	1057
1658	1044
1662	1673
1663	1150
1664	1504
1670	1180

Source: Daniele Beltrami, *Storia della Popolazione di Venezia*, Padova, CEDAM, 1954, p. 200.

the Mediterranean trading system were suffering a major economic recession. However, it is also worth noting that the trade system on which Timbuktu's economy depended was not falling apart only because it had been challenged by the emergence of the Trans-Oceanic trade system nor because some of the system's component parts were facing—as the Spanish and the Italian case illustrate—a major economic crisis. The Mediterranean trade system was also falling apart, and did fall apart by the end of the 17th century, because its component parts proved to be unable to function as a system. This problem can be best exemplified by the transformation in the economic relationship between Venice and Istanbul.

Venetian merchants, who had been a remarkable presence in Constantinople (or Istanbul) since, at least, the end of the tenth century (Luzzato 1961:13) were no longer hegemonic within the Turkish market. Zorzi illustrated the problem very clearly when he observed that “the Eastern Mediterranean sea is increasingly less an Italian lake” (Zorzi 1991:366). Cipolla provides a very interesting example in this respect, by noting that “it appears that during the first years of the seventeenth century Venice was able to export to Mediterranean ports something like 25000 cloths...a hundred years later, according to the Venetian ambassador at Constantinople, Venice was exporting not more than 100 cloths a year to that area, about fifty to Constantinople, and the same number to Smyrna” (Cipolla 1970:203).

Cipolla suggests that “the fundamental reason why Italian goods and services were supplanted by those offered by others was always the same: English, French

and Dutch services and goods were offered at lower prices” (Cipolla 1970:203). Cipolla ascribes the higher prices of Italian goods to a variety of factors: the quality of the Italian goods was higher, the Italian productive system was obsolete, the pressure of taxation in Italy was very high and the cost of labor was very high (Cipolla 1970:204–209). Yet, there is another reason why Venetian goods and services lost their competitiveness: the Turkish custom maintained a 5% import tax on all Venetian goods, that had been established in 1505. In contrast, “the Austrians were allowed, already in 1600, to pay only 3%, and the same privilege will be obtained by the French in 1673, by the English in 1675 and by the Dutch in 1680” (Zorzi 1991:391). Finally, the Venetian trade with the Near East was negatively affected by the fact that Italian ships were not as fast and technologically advanced as the English and the Dutch ships. High prices, high import taxes and an anachronistic shipping industry made it impossible for Venice and the other component parts of the previously hegemonic trade system in the Mediterranean to function as a system.

Given Timbuktu's economic dependence on the Mediterranean market and trade system, it is not terribly surprising that the combined effects of the emergence of the Trans-Oceanic trade, the decline of the previous commercial powers in the Mediterranean and their inability (and unwillingness) to function as a system had catastrophic consequences on Timbuktu's economic life and wealth. This said, Timbuktu's economic decay—as that of Italy and Spain—cannot be entirely ascribed to the action of international/economic factors. Domestic/institutional factors also played a major role in provoking Timbuktu's crisis.

The most important of these domestic/institutional/regional factors is represented by the fall of the Songhai empire, which had been attacked and defeated by the Moroccans in 1591. This event is of particular importance in the history (and especially for the fortunes) of Timbuktu because it created a vacuum of power in the region.¹⁶ The creation of a vacuum of power represents the major difference between the fall of the Ghana and the Mali empires on the one hand and that of the Songhai empire on the other hand. The Ghana empire was directly followed by the Mali empire and this, in turn, was immediately succeeded by the Songhai empire. In neither case, did the transition from one empire's rule to the other's leave a vacuum. On the contrary, the region was left in a state of anarchy, in which no power was able or willing to maintain

¹⁶ For a discussion of this point, see Robin Hallett (1970:152); see also James Curry (1999:157-160).

efficient institutions or acceptable institutional performances. The institutional decay was particularly evident with regard to property rights. With no power left in the region to protect property rights and to prevent caravans and traders from being robbed in their Trans-Saharan journeys, both the risks and the costs of trade increased. These increasing costs are responsible—in the end—for a further decline in the size of Trans-Saharan trade and for the irreversible crisis of Timbuktu.¹⁷

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of the rise and, more importantly, the fall of Timbuktu, with its many mysteries, seems to have several important implications. The purpose of this section is to discuss the most important lessons that can be learned from Timbuktu's history.

The first lesson concerns the nature of development: development is very fragile, it is difficult to achieve and very easy to lose. In a few years the rich, cultured, civic and developed Timbuktu degenerated into what July calls "an isolated town, a handful of unimpressive mud buildings housing a listless population which time had finally passed by" (July 1970:60). Culture, wealth and large stocks of social capital were not sufficient to prevent Timbuktu from decaying.

The second lesson is that neither development nor decay are promoted (at the ontological level) or explained (at the theoretical level) by any single factor. Although some factors might individually have a larger effect, or a better explanatory power, than others, causation and/or explanation result only from the interaction of multiple factors. The case of Timbuktu is exemplary in this respect: Timbuktu lost power and prestige because its market decayed. However, no single factor can account individually for this event. In the present paper we have suggested that the crisis of Timbuktu's market was provoked, among other things, by the interaction of two factors: first, the general decline of Mediterranean trade in the world trade resulting from the emergence of the new Trans-Oceanic trade, and the crisis of the system's component parts at the individual level and their inability to function as a system; second, the institutional decay which followed the fall of the Songhai empire, which made Trans-Saharan trade particularly risky and, henceforth, economically inefficient.

¹⁷ July (1970:59-60) observes that "Timbuktu flourished as long as the civilization it represented was able to provide peace and political stability for its trade. With the collapse of the Songhai empire, the fortunes of Timbuktu took a permanent turn which saw the once thriving city degenerate into an isolated dusty town".

This said, two points need to be stressed: first, the survival of an hegemonic Mediterranean trade system would not have preserved by itself the wealth of Timbuktu in the absence of an adequate institutional framework. Similarly, a stronger institutional system—per se—would not have prevented Timbuktu from decaying but would have certainly limited the extent of the decay.

In sum, the third and final lesson to be learned from Timbuktu's story is that social phenomena result from different factors, and, of course, their complex interactions. Phenomena, especially social phenomena, become meaningful only when they are analyzed in what critical phenomenologists (or neo-phenomenologists) call the infinite web of relationship in which they exist. In this case, Timbuktu's decay becomes meaningful only if it is analyzed in the light of the relationship between external and internal factors. To focus on one set of factors, instead of focusing on both of them, might increase the elegance and the parsimony of our explanatory model, but it undermines its precision and reliability. But this is not the purpose of social research, whose objective is (and should be) the understanding of reality rather than its misrepresentation. This objective can be achieved only if we constantly remember that words of Guicciardini, who noted in his *Ricordi Politici e Civili* "it is a great error to speak of the affairs of this world in absolute terms, without discrimination, and—so to speak—by rule; for they almost always involve distinctions and exceptions, because circumstances vary, and they can never be subject to one single measure. These distinctions and exceptions are not to be found in books: this must be taught by mature discretion alone."

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