

**The Chamber of Commerce of Genoa two hundred years after its foundation:
interview with Paolo Odone, the President**

by Alessandro Lombardo

Alessandro Lombardo: In 2005, you celebrated the bicentenary of the foundation of the Chamber of Commerce of Genoa, which marked a particularly significant period for the economic development of Genoa. How would you describe the relation between the Chamber's long history and its current reality?

Paolo Cesare Odone: The Chamber of Commerce of Genoa was founded in 1805 by Napoleon immediately after the annexation of the glorious Genoese Republic to France. The Chamber contributed to the founding and development of the first Italian industries in the production of capital assets, as well as in the shipbuilding, mechanical and steel industry. Before the founding of the Port Authority in 1903, in which the Chamber participated, the Chamber of Commerce dealt with maritime problems, promoted steam-navigation and was actively involved in Ferdinando de Lesseps' initiative for the opening of the Suez Canal. The Chamber followed all new discoveries in the field of communications with great interest and promoted the building of important infrastructures, including the Genoa-Turin railway, which opened in 1854; the Carrettiera Carlo Alberto, today Via Gramsci; and the bonded warehouse, which has been directly managed by the Chamber since 1877. Finally, after World War Two, the Chamber of Commerce actively supported the idea of a united Europe within the Genoese entrepreneurial class.

As you can see, industry, the port and the infrastructure are three issues that appear throughout our two-hundred-year history as a *unifying thread* and that, even today, continue to hold top priority on our agenda.

Alessandro Lombardo: The Chamber of Commerce, along with its President, has shown its sensitivity to the promotion of Genoese enterprise through the preservation and the valorization of its industrial cultural heritage. Regarding this, it is sufficient to remember the support given to the Ansaldo Foundation or the recent recognition awarded to hundred-year-old companies. In your opinion, what other useful actions could be taken in this field?

Paolo Cesare Odone: In its two hundred years of existence, the Chamber of Commerce has accumulated an extensive documentary heritage of remarkable historical value (especially regarding the economic life of Genoa and its territory) for which it has created a very prestigious library.

A historical treasure of this nature needs continuous care that extends beyond its physical preservation. It is equally important to deal with issues such as the legislative introduction of new procedures linked to the computerization of the public administration, the widespread presence of the Net and the obsolescence of archival software that is no longer supported by modern data processing systems.

That's why the Chamber of Commerce has begun three types of intervention for the reorganization and rationalization of both historical and current archives in collaboration with the Ansaldo Foundation. These are the computerization of the catalogue of the Chamber's Library, the cataloguing and digitalization of the manuscripts, and finally, the publication of the Historic Fond.

Moreover, we are setting up a project to valorize the archives of the Companies' Register, an operation of great significance concerning the entrepreneurial history of Genoa between 1882 and 1942, the year in which the Civil Code came into force with the consequent abolition of the Commerce Code.

Alessandro Lombardo: The 1993 reform appointed an agency associated to the Chamber as a "planning table for the different strategies of the territory". What are those strategies for development according to the law and the considerations of the Administrative Board and the Presidency of the Chamber?

Paolo Cesare Odone: The Chamber of Commerce, whose function it is to represent the unified economic system of the Genoa Province, will continue to strengthen its dialogue with other institutions where the common goal is to re-launch and reinforce the local economy. This dialogue covers key issues (already identified in 2004) which include infrastructure and logistics, internationalization, valorization of the territory, technological innovation and transfers, valorization of the records and buildings heritage, e-government, training and vocational guidance, and finally, market regulation.

Regarding this last issue, the law for the reform of the Chamber of Commerce (580/93) ascribed new and relevant responsibilities to the Chambers, recognizing them as ideal headquarters since they ensure impartiality and independence for two necessary functions: the promotion of a market that operates according to clear rules; and the resolution of disputes. For this reason, the Chamber is currently involved in the creation of committees of arbitration and conciliation aimed at the resolution of controversies between businesses, as well as between businesses and consumers. The Chamber also deals with the preparation of model contracts for enterprises and business and consumer associations, and the monitoring of contracts for unfair clauses. In this way, through the creation of Arbitration Chambers, a network of conciliation services has been developed which is the same throughout the Italian territory. In particular, the Chamber of Commerce of Genoa, over the last 100 years, has dedicated particular attention to the prevention and resolution of commercial disputes. It is interesting to note that the Commodity Exchange of Genoa was the office of one of the oldest Italian Arbitration Chambers and this tradition is still alive, placing special emphasis on conciliation as an instrument for resolving disputes with the help of only one third impartial and neutral person, the conciliator.

Alessandro Lombardo: The activities of data collection and ordering of the Chamber's system recalls – in some way – the filing of the "historical industrial memory" of the Ansaldo Foundation: a common, yet dynamic use of the data. Unioncamere, the Italian union of all the Chambers of Commerce, through the Project Excelsior, monitors the creation of jobs within

the Italian productive system. In 2005, 33% of these requirements were concentrated in the field of highly skilled labor, showing the pre-existing vitality of industrial-manufacturing “know-how”. Does the provincial percentage confirm the national one? If so, what conclusions can be drawn from this in terms of productive specialization and job-training in the territory?

Paolo Cesare Odone: The Genoese percentage is 23%, lower than the national level but I think that the most interesting aspect to be considered regards the hiring of skilled labor. While on a national level the demand for skilled workers is around 34%, in our province it reaches almost 60% and the businesses in the Genoa area have a hard time finding skilled labor (the businesses have pointed out difficulties in 40% of the time).

This alarming situation should not be ignored especially by the Chamber of Commerce, which emphasizes vocational guidance and training among its strategic priorities. I would like to underline that the Chamber’s longstanding involvement in managerial and entrepreneurial training aims to give concrete answers in terms of specific expertise, to the economic sectors that most contribute to the development of the territory.

To this end, the Chamber in agreement with the University of Genoa carries out initiatives addressed to vocational guidance for students. Even before graduation, their professional choices are facilitated thanks to direct knowledge of the business world acquired through internships and training programs in various firms throughout the Genoa province. Moreover, the Chamber, in collaboration with the Liguria Center for the Productivity, and the Training Agency of the Chamber of Commerce of Genoa, promotes training initiatives for people who are considering starting up their own business, and to the personnel of small and medium companies in need of managerial up-dating and training.

Alessandro Lombardo: In light of these ongoing transformations and looking towards the future, which structural changes would you make in order to increase the active role of the Chamber of Commerce?

Paolo Cesare Odone: At the present moment, the debate on maintaining the Chambers of Commerce within the public system is particularly heated and some people are considering the possibility of their privatization. Personally, I do not agree with this: I am convinced that the strength of the Chambers of Commerce is in their public nature, giving them the possibility of acting as a sort of clearinghouse and as a privileged interlocutor between the needs of the different economic categories and of other institutions, first of all the Regions, in their relations with the network of private enterprise. . We should remember that the Italian Chamber of Commerce follows a French model where the *Chambres* are a real and true economic power and an example of good public administration, and they do not have an Anglo-Saxon model where the Chambers of Commerce are free entrepreneurial associations competing on the market with the other interest groups.