

RURAL SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS¹

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The writer of a village study sooner or later faces the problem of deciding where to close his system. If he wishes to move beyond straight description he must explain what he observes in terms of variables which pertain, not to other things which he finds in the village, but to some larger system which extends beyond it. So in the Village Studies Project (reported elsewhere in this issue) patterns of labour utilization in a village are correlated not only with other internal features such as man/land ratios, but also with variables describing the village's connections to the outside world, such as distance from towns. A somewhat different, though complementary, perspective sees the village as part of a relatively homogeneous region, and explains regularities within the village in terms of the position of its region in a larger economic and political system. This approach connects with the broad notion of dependency theory, which emphasises the economic and political relations *between* nations and regions as reasons for persisting development or underdevelopment *within* a nation or region. It stresses that, for some countries and regions, external relationships, and the dynamics they condition, tend to dominate internal dynamics.

The village I studied lies in Tuscany (about 150 kms. north of Rome). The significant point about this location is that Tuscany and Central and North Italy generally, formed a semi-periphery in the European world economy which emerged during the 'long' sixteenth century — 1450 to 1640. Let me first elaborate on the structure of

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¹ This paper differs from others in this volume in that it does not report the results of research sponsored by IDS. The research formed part of a project on low-income communities in Europe directed by F.G. Bailey, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sussex. Some of the results have been presented in a DPhil thesis (Wade 1971). Converting the thesis into a book has been unexpectedly protracted, and has taken up part of my time at IDS. The present paper is an attempt to put the specific analysis of the village study into a broader explanatory context.

the European world economy and Tuscany's place in it, then go on to consider the relevance of the centre-periphery dimension to the differences in present-day social organization between rural Tuscany and rural South Italy.

Northwest Europe constituted the core area of the European world economy.² Here was found a complex variety of economic activities, including mass-market industries, national and international commerce in the hands of an indigenous bourgeoisie, and an advanced agricultural organization combining large estates given over to pastoralism and surplus-producing yeoman farmers. In line with these economic developments strong central governments evolved in the core states, with an absolute monarch and a powerful bureaucracy primarily serving the monarch.

The periphery stretched in a vast band from Eastern Europe (but not Russia) to the southern part of the Christian Mediterranean, and on into Latin America. Here, the variety of economic activities was largely restricted to those connected with a monoculture cash crop for export to the core, and land organization took the form of large estates worked by coerced labour. Excluding Latin America, the periphery experienced a 'second feudalism' during the 15th and 16th centuries,³ more brutal than the first, at a time when feudal relations had disappeared in Northwest Europe. For as market opportunities expanded in the core states, landlords in the periphery faced the problem of ensuring a supply of low-cost labour, which they did by effectively tying the peasants to the land. In Latin America, the Spanish and Portuguese colonists established the same type of land organization as existed at home by limiting access to land to the already wealthy (in contrast to North America, where the colonists came from the core) and by establishing 'second feudalism'

² The following account of the European world economy is an elaboration on Wallerstein's study (1972).

³ This statement is not strictly correct. Whereas Poland, for example, first experienced a second feudalism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a response to its peripheral position with respect to Northwest Europe, South Italy began to experience a second feudalism in the thirteenth century as a response to its peripheral position with respect to Central and North Italy. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, this trend in South Italy was intensified due to the change in centre-periphery relations as North-west Europe became the core, and due also to Spanish colonial policies.

relationships between landlords and those who worked their land. The outstanding political characteristic of the periphery was the *absence* of strong central government. The local notables who dominated rural society were relatively invulnerable to the control of a central bureaucracy; thus rural communities were penetrated by international market forces more strongly than by the state. The result was an ecology of settlement in which each rural community was linked directly to the outside world, not to local urban centres in a hierarchical division of labour such as existed in the core areas.

The semi-periphery included Central and North Italy and also (though my knowledge here is less certain) Southern France and parts of Northern Spain. I shall concentrate on Central and North Italy. Before the sixteenth century, this had been the core of a smaller Mediterranean economy. Its cities – Venice, Genova, Florence, for example – were centres of trade, finance and textile manufacture. South Italy, Southern Spain, as well as Crete and Cyprus, were its periphery, supplying it with food and raw materials. Its bankers and merchants wielded much of what central power existed in the periphery states. Florentine bankers, for example, dominated the royal bureaucracy of South Italy from the 13th to the 16th century, holding the right to collect taxes, control monopolies, manage the export of grain (the principal product), and pay the salaries of state employees. Land organization around the Central and Northern cities evolved in response to its core position. During the 12th and 13th centuries, feudal relations in agriculture gave way to contractual forms, notably the *mezzadria* share-farming contract in which landlord and tenant shared costs and output in roughly equal proportions. (This same form also came to be widely distributed through France). Finally, relatively strong, centralized state structures emerged in the northern and central cities as a consequence of growing commercialization, with power shared between aristocratic and bourgeois elements in a republican form of government.

When the European world economy was created, Central and North Italy de-industrialized. State structures weakened and town life declined. Power became more concentrated in scattered countryside domains. But the process did not go so far as to make it a periphery. The *mezzadria* form of land organization (which represents an intermediate form in relation to that of the core and

that of the periphery) remained dominant. State power remained stronger in the Centre-North, one indication of which is the much lower incidence of brigandage in the Centre-North than in the South (and in Southern Spain and Eastern Europe), where it remained endemic into the twentieth century.

As the Centre-North de-industrialized, Spain assumed hegemony over the South, which it retained as a colony until the eighteenth century. Far from altering the existing economic and political structures, Spanish policies served to reinforce them — particularly because Spain itself remained a semi-periphery and was not able to back its colonial administration by industrial technology and organization. Thus, right up to the end of the eighteenth century the control of the royal bureaucracy extended little beyond the few cities while in the countryside the nobility held control. Partly because of their long history as rent-maximizing landlords, the southern barons did not follow whatever opportunities existed to invest in manufacturing; and the bourgeoisie which began to emerge in the 18th century showed a similar evaluation of activities as it turned its attention to land, administration and the legal profession. The various states of the Centre-North during the same period remained independent or under the domination of powers which were themselves part of the industrializing core.

The Napoleonic regime which ruled most of Italy after 1805 brought about a change in land organization in the South which later rulers could not undo. (The Centre-North, having ‘contractualized’ its agriculture centuries before was little affected by the Napoleonic reforms). After the abolition of feudal privileges, much land in the South remained concentrated in the hands of the aristocracy. But increasingly over the 19th century it passed into the hands of the land-hungry bourgeoisie and peasants, giving rise to a class of medium-sized rentiers and small owner-cultivators. By the turn of the 20th century, a variety of ownership patterns existed in the South: in some parts, large estates (*latifundia*) persisted, in others small, middle-class peasants made up the bulk of the population, and, in others, medium-sized rentiers predominated. What gave homogeneity to the South’s agriculture was not land ownership but land use. Whether held in large units or owned by the cultivator, land was fragmented into small plots, predominantly devoted to cereals. It was

an agriculture without farms. As one student summarizes the situation:

‘Typically, in the same year, a cultivator with his nuclear family household worked on a number of plots under a variety of contracts, varying from seasonal sharecropping to day labouring. Perhaps he also worked a plot of his own... This combination was highly variable. Its variability from year to year determined the socioeconomic rank of the cultivator as he jockeyed for position in this bitterly competitive society’.

(McDonald and McDonald, 1964: 114).

We are now in a position to look at differences in social organization between communities in the Centre-North and in the South. Unfortunately, very little has been published about communities in the Centre-North — not a single book length treatment exists — and I shall therefore draw heavily on my own study of a Tuscan village (thereby violating even the none-too-rigorous anthropological maxim, ‘never generalize from less than two examples’). One of the most striking differences between this village and those which have been studied in the South (and what little published material on the Centre-North exists suggests that my village is in this respect broadly representative of the whole region⁴) concerns the relative importance of corporate and noncorporate forms of organization: corporate groups are important in the Centre-North, noncorporate groups unimportant; and vice versa for the South. Why?

Corporate groups are distinguished from noncorporate groups by a common interest in property (broadly defined) which is vested in the group *per se*.⁵ Thus, formal voluntary associations are corporate groups, as are lineages, while coalitions, cliques, and patron-client chains are noncorporate. Community studies in the South constantly emphasize the importance attached to informal contractual ties between individuals and/or nuclear families — ties of kinship, fictive kinship, friendship and clientship. Take godparenthood, for example.

⁴ See Silverman 1968, McDonald and McDonald 1964.

⁵ The distinction between noncorporate and corporate groups is from Schneider *et al* 1972. The general thesis I advance here owes much to this article.

The choice of godparents is a crucial one for Southern parents, not only because the godparenthood tie provides security and assistance to their children as they grow up, but also because it can create or reinforce relationships between them and the godparents they choose. An anthropologist speaking about Sicily described the godparent-godchild and godparent-parent relationship as ‘unextinguishable – it is almost like a blood relationship and it persists throughout life; woe to one who violates it’.⁶ Similarly, the category of ‘true friend’ is an important one in the South: the ‘true friend’ is to be treated like a brother, and a man has only three or four such relationships at a time. Obligations in these relationships are chosen, not ascribed, by those who will be obligated, and can be withdrawn from *without loss of assets*; they do not entail collective responsibility. The relationships have powerful ideological and ritual supports, and it is this, above all, which indicates they are not simply of secondary importance, as they tend to be in Western Europe and North America, but are primary in the organization and pursuit of power.

This pattern of social relations goes with a world view in which people beyond the family are seen as liable to betray. Distrust in interpersonal relations is a constantly emphasised theme in South Italian studies. Hence an individual’s relationships with others are loaded with political significance: he must be constantly on guard to protect himself from others, and must enter alliances for carrying out concerted activity on condition that he can withdraw rapidly without loss. The ideology of kinship, godparenthood and ‘true friendship’ can be seen as a response to this situation; as an attempt to give some stability to a small number of ties, by investing the fulfillment of obligations in these ties (but not in others) with a degree of sacredness.

In short, the image is one of individuals constructing a ‘nest’ of security for themselves and their families by forming informal contractual ties with other individuals. The patterns can be understood as a response to the Hobbesian ‘state of nature’ in South Italy, where the state was weak and unable to guarantee property, agreements, or even life; where stable feudal ties, based on well-defined reciprocal rights between overlord and dependents, had

⁶ Quoted in: *Themes in Italian Culture*, 1953, p. 138.

long since given way to coercive relations between rent-maximizing landlords and their tenants; and where, since the Napoleonic land reform of the early 19th century, intense competition existed for access to land, leading to a highly fragmented and unstable land organization. It is not surprising, therefore, that corporate groups, such as cooperatives, civic amenities societies, and political parties are relatively few and operate with difficulty. Similarly, it is not surprising that when indigenous trading and manufacturing activity did begin in the South, it was organized, not in joint stock companies as in Western Europe, but in loose coalitions of 'friends', who came together to pool resources and attempted to reduce their risks by emphasizing the ties of 'true friendship' which bound them. But this form of organization is not capable of the efficiency and power of a more bureaucratic form, which is one (perhaps minor) reason why industrialization in South Italy has continued to lag behind the North. Similarly, because *collective* action is difficult, political demands cannot be made on behalf of large numbers of people; 'interest aggregation' is limited to small and particularistic patron-client chains. This, too, tends to perpetuate the South's position of dependency within the Italian state, by limiting the pressure that can be applied for a greater share of state resources and protection to be given to the South.

In Tuscany, where the state presence in rural communities has been strong for centuries, where standardized contractual relations existed between landlords and tenants, and where urban-industrial influences emanating from the Northern cities in the late 19th century penetrated more deeply than in the South, one finds much less stress on the kinds of informal contractual ties described above. Individuals did not face the same risks, and so did not need to protect themselves by constructing a web of special relationships. In my village, several informants had trouble recalling who their godparents were, and everyone agreed that the choice of godparent was not a particularly important matter. There was nothing approaching the Southern institution of 'true friendship', and the evidence suggests that as far back as living memory goes the patron-client form of organization has been rather weak. Certainly poor people approached the wealthy for personal assistance; but stable patron-client blocks did not emerge — so that today, for example, people are not identified as having been clients (or

supporters) of family X. As well as the general reasons suggested above, the specific reasons why patron-client chains were not a basic form of organization are that in this particular village the large landlords (who held estates ranging from 1,000 to 4,000 hectares) were absentee, the largest landowners resident in the village (with between 50 ha. and 200 ha.) had too little prestige and influence in urban society to be of much help, and the state officials and professionals resident in the community tended to be outsiders whose promotion prospects did not depend on their power base in the community. To what extent similar features were found in other villages of the region is not known.⁷

Conversely, voluntary associations were relatively well developed. Many villages boasted a band, a confraternity, a sports club, drama club, one or more work cooperatives. The League of *Mezzadri* was a powerful force limiting the exactions of landlords, and it played a major part in spreading and channelizing the unrest which swept through parts of North and Central Italy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Joint stock companies were much more frequent in the Centre-North than in the South, and political parties had greater impact there. Thus, the kind of social organization which evolved in the Centre-North as a response to its more central position in the European world economy helped to maintain its economic advantage over the South.

This is not to say that important differences do not exist between social organization in the Centre-North and in the core region further to the north. It would be misleading to portray the villages of Central and North Italy as humming with associational life. For while many formal associations do exist (whether with the same or lower frequency than in core areas is a question on which I have no information), they commonly operate with difficulty. The smooth operation of formal associations depends on what has been termed the 'institutionalization of suspicion';⁸ on rules which provide for

⁷ Silverman (1965), however, reports a classic patron-client form of organization for an Umbrian village prior to the Second World War. In refining the general argument of this paper, a clear distinction would have to be made between Tuscany on the one hand, and Umbria and the Marches on the other. Although all are included in 'Central Italy', the latter were part of the Papal state, and experienced a history somewhat more like that of the South than did Tuscany and the rest of Central and North Italy.

⁸ See Dore 1971.

periodic checks on the propriety of those to whom responsibility is delegated — the audit and the regular re-election of officers, for example. The existence of these regular checks helps ensure that relations between the membership and officers are based on mutual trust; in this sense, suspicion is institutionalized and kept within bounds. But because there is, in Central Italy, as in the South, a general predisposition to believe that other people will betray in order to follow their own interests (how much stronger it is in the South is a question that the literature provides no evidence on), suspicions of the leadership are not contained by the institutionalized procedures. One response has been to multiply the formal safeguards. So a manual of rules for *mezzadri* leagues, written in 1902, stated that the head of a group required a four-fifths majority to be elected; that all the accounts were to be open to any member at any time; that when disputes arose with employers the representatives of the league must have the authorization of each member before starting negotiations. Similarly, the confraternity in the village where I worked elected two treasurers at once during the years from when it began in the early 19th century up to about 1850, and thereafter it elected one treasurer and one auditor, specifying that the auditor could not be within a certain kinship distance of the treasurer. The consumer cooperative which started in the early 20th century also used a variety of safeguards: meticulous and full minutes of meetings; three election scrutineers, who sometimes submitted a written report; three auditors; a rule that kinsmen of employees could not be auditors; and a practice of sending at least two committee members to make purchases from farmers. One finds today that elected officials of voluntary associations are liable to come in for heavy criticism on the grounds that they are using their position to benefit themselves — though the criticism is never expressed face-to-face. The effect is to reduce competition for leadership, for no prestige is gained through activity of this kind, and to make elected officials wary of innovating. Moreover, the associations have little place in the organization of power (the League of *Mezzadri* was an exception). Partly because of the weakness of the Italian state after Unification (1861) and the corresponding strength of local power-holders, the Italian government structure does not provide for direct relations between groups of citizens and administrators; rather it centralizes

decision-making firmly within the bureaucracy, thereby – in intention – overcoming local privilege. In practice, the governmental structure is open to outside manipulation at every level. But the rules are followed to the extent that manipulation goes through personal relationships, rather than through open and regularized consultation between administrators, politicians, and groups of citizens with common interests. On the ground at village level, this means that the commune administration makes decisions without attempting to determine opinions from a cross-section by those affected; and this limits the power of voluntary associations.

Thus, in terms of the importance of formal common-interest associations and of informal coalitions and cliques based on kinship, fictive kinship, friendship and clientship, Central Italy is intermediate between Northwest Europe and South Italy. I have argued that this correlates with differences in the pattern of economic and political developments in these three areas, and that the whole bundle of differences can be explained in terms of their position as core, semi-periphery and periphery in the European world economy and the conditions which their position gave rise to. The next step might be to apply the same perspective to the analysis of economic and political development since the 16th century in the ‘external areas’ of the European world economy – Russia and India, for example.

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