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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

In Locorotondo, in the heel of Southern Italy, the rural folk repeat a proverb: "If you want to eat bread, stay far from the church bells."[1] This book is about the meaning of that proverb. It explores the history, causes, and sociocultural ramifications of the unusual settlement pattern found in Locorotondo and in other towns located in a zone of Apulia in Southern Italy known as the Murgia dei Trulli (the Plateau of the Trulli). *Trulli* are peasant dwellings characterized by cone-shaped domes surmounted by whitewashed finial ornaments, and are found only in this zone of Italy. Here a high proportion of residence in the countryside accompanies a moderate degree of peasant prosperity in what one turn-of-the-century geographer called "an oasis of small property in a zone of large estates" (Maranelli, 1946). The settlement pattern of Locorotondo originated at least as far back as the early eighteenth century, consolidated during the nineteenth, and has endured through the upheavals of the twentieth into the present. A little over 50 percent of the town's population continues to live in the countryside, and relative prosperity, based upon the building trades adopted by the sons of generations of peasant small proprietors, persists in the countryside.

After a day's visit in 1974 during a journey home from the Island of Pantelleria, my other field site, and after much library research, I chose the Murgia dei Trulli for concentrated study. The area, its Locorotondese heartland in particular, contrasted sharply with the south of the *latifondo*, agrotown, and rural proletarian. I felt that in unraveling the history and culture of such a place I could not only gain an understanding of why a dispersed settlement pattern and small holder agriculture had developed, but also of how these facts related to social structure and values.

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Peasants, settlement, and the Murgia dei Trulli

I made my choice from a concern that the historical and ethnographic portrayal of rural South Italy be made more complex and complete. Both within the Italian tradition of writing about the south (called *meridionalismo*) and the "southern problem," and within the English-language anthropological, sociological, and journalistic literatures on the area, there emerges an emphasis on the agrotown with its poverty stricken rural proletariat. However, as Arlacchi has recently reiterated in his analysis of Calabria, there are and have been many southern Italies (Arlacchi, 1983). To be sure much, even most, of the south has a history of agrotown settlement and endemic poverty, and the thorough descriptions of Cornelisen (1969, 1976), Davis (1973), Lopreato (1967), Blok (1974), and Schneider and Schneider (1976), among others, constitute essential contributions which portray with accuracy and insight the realities those authors experienced. But so far there has been little ethnographic or ethnohistorical work which is comparable in thoroughness to those works and which focuses on small proprietor peasant settings in the south, or on the zones which contain dispersed settlement.[2]

Of course the concentration and dispersal of settlement among European peasantries is a topic which has generated considerable literature. Dovring, in his classic work on twentieth-century European agricultural systems, reviews some of this literature and broadly maps the degree of dispersion and concentration in settlement patterns throughout Europe. Apulia as a whole fits into his category of very highest concentration into agrotowns (1965: fig. 1). This underlines the suspicion that something remarkable accounts for the strong development of the opposite pattern in the sub-zone of Apulia where Locorotondo lies.

Anthropologists and others have now dealt at length with dispersed peasant settlement patterns and their social organizational implications in Central and North Italy. Notable among these studies are Silverman's study of an Umbrian town (1975), Kertzer's historical study of coresidence among peasants living near the city of Bologna (1984), and Barbagli's discussion of Northern and Central Italian peasant family patterns (1984: 113–121). All three works devote attention to the *mezzadria* (long-term sharecropping) pattern typical for peasants in those areas. Although the classic upper Italian *mezzadria* pattern certainly involved dispersed residence, the histori-

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cal, economic, and social circumstances under which it developed are completely different from those of the deep south where such long-term, tightly controlled, sharecropping and family coresidence patterns were rare.

There have been several efforts to map and describe dispersed settlement areas specifically in the Italian South (Biasutti, 1932; Dickinson, 1956), but these studies adopt a spatial approach lacking an anthropologically holistic view of society and a concern with understanding specific cases in depth. Attention to the concentration and dispersion of peasant populations in the post-Second World War literature particularly relates to agrarian reform efforts in the *mezzogiorno* which in part consisted of trying to move peasants into the countryside to settle on redistributed land. Although done with the conviction that peasant small proprietorship and rural residence would promote development and greater working efficiencies, these engineered efforts met with mixed success (Dickenson, 1956: 297; Blok, 1966). It is therefore important to understand an area such as the Murgia dei Trulli where dispersed settlement developed indigenously in seeming contradiction to the normal southern agrotown pattern.

In a short article Blok attempted to explain the existence and persistence of the agrotown pattern in Southern Italy and in the same breath addressed the opposite phenomenon, dispersed settlement (1969). Through a review of previous literature, and his own field experience in Sicily, he invoked some of the variables which were likely to lead toward agglomeration and toward dispersion. His conclusion about the latter was that it accompanied intensive agriculture and made sense "only if the peasant is either owner of a more or less united plot, or if as a tenant he enjoys a certain degree of independence regarding a similar piece of land" (1969: 132). While united land does not prove to be crucial to dispersed settlement on the Murgia dei Trulli, the factor of long-term control over land is important for understanding it in Apulia and will be considered in later chapters.

More recently Arlacchi provided an analysis of three agricultural regimes in Calabria which he asserts differ strikingly in terms of their agricultural exploitation, their economic conditions, and their social structures (Arlacchi, 1980). The areas Arlacchi describes include a zone of rural proletarians and great estates; a zone of constantly shifting entrepreneurial activity, and a zone of dispersed small

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proprietorship. He argues that these three peasant economic situations produced three distinctive types of social and family relations. His analysis introduces a greater expectation of holism into the analysis of the connection between settlement, land tenure, and social organization in South Italy and begs for amplification and verification. One of the areas he describes recalls the characteristics of Locorotondo and surrounding communities. The generalizations Arlacchi makes about the small proprietor regime there serve to define a South Italian small proprietor type, and as such they will deserve discussion in the last chapter of this work.

Through the years several Italian scholars have written about the Murgia dei Trulli, describing its major characteristics and correctly attributing differences between it and surrounding *latifondo* zones to perpetual lease (emphyteusis) contracts (Calella, 1941; Maranelli, 1946; Presutti, 1909; Ricchioni, 1958, 1959). However, these writers based their analyses upon contemporary observation of varying quality, not thorough archival research, and they do not provide an understanding of the ramifications of small proprietorship and dispersed settlement in the social settings of the towns in the zone. Their writings are especially valuable, however, as first hand reports of conditions during the times in which they were published.

Themes and organization

This book is meant, then, as a case study of a town on the Murgia dei Trulli which will broaden scholarly understanding of small proprietor and rurally settled peasant lifeways in the *mezzogiorno*. Part I describes the present of Locorotondo as I came to know it during my first field season in 1981–1982. It focuses on the theme of work and values about work, and compares town and country. Part of my task in the rest of the book is to describe the collective historical experience which produced those values. My approach to the present is diachronic. The "present" of a population is really the accumulation of the "pasts," the experiences, of the individuals who make it up. A profound sense of having been born into a "traditional" world which has been transformed into a "modern" one typifies the experiences of adults in Locorotondo. I do not mean to suggest by this use of a "traditional" and "modern" dichotomy that I subscribe to a variant of "modernization theory," which proposes change from some kind of static "classic peasant" situation toward an inevitable

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urban one. In fact, as I will show, the past described as traditional and little changing by my informants was full of change, and the unusual directions Locorotondo and neighboring locales have taken in the twentieth century put any notion of inevitable kinds of "modernization" to the lie. Rather, most of my informants grew up, learned to work, and formulated a set of values in a society *they saw* as linked generationally to a peasant past, and then in the late 1950s and early 1960s felt the jolt of a variety of changes which produced a strong sense of discontinuity with that past.

I have therefore adopted a shorthand terminology to refer to this sense. In this book the term "peasant" will refer to those families whose values and aspirations centered around carrying out full-time, but small-scale agriculture, but who often needed to supplement income by engaging family members in agricultural wage labor for purposes such as trousseau and marriage savings, or to provide a better living. During 1981–1982 there were still such families, but with few exceptions aging patriarchs headed them. The 1950s was the last decade in which it is safe to conclude that most rural families fell into this category. Aside from long distance migration, which would soon become an important factor, there were few other possibilities. The term "postpeasant" will refer to the individuals and families who came into adulthood during the decades after and including the 1960s, many of whose experiences include migration to the north and to other European countries or significant work experience outside agriculture in Apulia. Some of these individuals could be labeled "worker-peasants" – indeed some of them work in the Italsider steel mill in Taranto – but others have also been small-scale construction entrepreneurs with a high degree of autonomy. Also, while men have often been "part-time peasants," their wives have given full-time to agriculture and the household. Therefore, I have preferred the less restrictive term "postpeasant."

Part II of this book traces the historical development of settlement patterns in Locorotondo and the development of its peasant society in detail. Of course, social historical analysis in anthropology needs no special justification at this juncture in the development of the field, especially among scholars who concentrate upon Europe, but Anton Blok's introductory words in *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860–1960* are worth recalling.[3]

> However invaluable and indispensable, the field work experience alone is insufficient to cope with the events of change in complex societies. To grasp the

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relationship between peasants and the larger society, data from field work must be supplemented with historical information. (1974: xxx–xxxi)

Insofar as I know, my book is the first anthropological history of a South Italian town to push detailed historical analysis back into the eighteenth century. For the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries I rely, wherever possible, upon archival documentation, and the research brought to light many documents which were unknown even to local scholars in Locorotondo. To move from the recent present into the past, particularly to cast light on poorly documented dim areas, such as peasant family structure, I have had to rely upon oral history.

The words of an important eighteenth-century Neapolitan liberal thinker, Antonio Genovesi, suggested a central theme for the analysis of Locorotondo's development. In 1769 Genovesi, deploring the state of agriculture in the kingdom, and comparing it unfavorably with that of other parts of Europe (particularly England), asserted that ideally agriculture ought to fall into the hands of gentlemen and scientists, and wrote of the discouragement of its development in the following terms:

It is too well known how much difference there is between the cultivation of one's own field and that of another. The desire for wealth, for the hope of being better off ourselves, and for leaving our children in a better state, is a great motive to animate us toward work, and to make us think about and work upon our business with more skill, diligence, and spirit. So those peasants who have their own lands are always the wisest, most judicious, and most industrious. They think not only of earning for the present, but they push their thoughts toward the future and therefore use ingenuity to better and to perpetuate their holdings. This does not happen among those who work in the fields of others. What is it to them if all is ruined within a few years? Instead, the insult of seeing others fatten on their fatigue will make them rascally and so instead of improving things they will make them worse so as to be destructive. They also become sneaks, thieves, and assassins. And when it does not seem to them that they will succeed well at this life, they will live as thoughtless lazy beggars, or they will go populate certain cloisters to live off the backs of those few who continue to work. (Genovesi, 1978: 7–8)[4]

Genovesi underlined the problem of absentee and unconcerned landlordism, particularly among churchmen, raised the spector of class conflict and peasant rebellion by referring to "those excitations and steam vents, to which every so often the people are subject," and suggested the remedy that lands held by "those who either will not or cannot cultivate them," be "bestowed in perpetuity." He continued:

I know many wise and prudent gentlemen, once retired to the capital and being unable to supervise their estates, who have immediately sold or given their lands

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in perpetual lease. And I do not believe they have given it a second thought afterwards. One who gives his land in emphyteusis, even if he earns less income, can be sure of two points in accordance with human behavior: (1) that the income will be certain and constant; and (2) that the farm will not finish in ruin. If there were more who ceded their land in emphyteusis, they would be surer of their incomes because in that way population increase would not be lacking, and this is always a secure guarantee of a market for produce and consequently of income for proprietors. Therefore the true economy for lay proprietors who cannot oversee their properties or cultivate them, would be to lease them out in perpetuity. They would be looking after their own good and that of the community. But the clerics cannot and (as things now stand) must not farm for themselves. To say that St. Paul took pride in having worked with his hands to live and that among the rules of the first religious orders agriculture was a requirement, is not to realize that from the 18th century standpoint one is speaking of men of the 1st and 4th centuries. Therefore so that their lands do not become degraded, one cannot give them better counsel than, 'Divide, divide, but in small portions!' and I know that the most prudent think in this way. (1978: 9–10)

In these passages Genovesi suggested an *adaptive strategy* for landowners which was not, as he noted, original to his thinking but which he was among the first of the *Meridionalisti* ('Southernists') to formally espouse. That strategy was to divide unproductive estates among the peasantry through emphyteusis, or perpetual lease, with the stipulation of improvement of the land by the peasant tenant. Genovesi noted that this would produce a strong incentive to work hard, cultivate well and make the land productive, and, he thought, would guarantee a secure income to the landlord. Genovesi neglected to mention the landlord's other advantage in following such a strategy. This was that under the laws of the Kingdom of Naples, the tax burden of the land held under emphyteusis fell on the shoulders of the tenant. He also erroneously believed that the population of the kingdom was diminishing when, instead, during the eighteenth century it doubled in most zones. Understandably he failed to foresee the inflation which would erode emphyteutical rents over the coming decades.

I have chosen John Bennett's key concept of "adaptive strategy" for its usefulness in the study of complex societies such as that of the Murgia dei Trulli (Bennett, 1976: 271–272). As Bennett defines the concept it refers to the idea of purposive behavior – what Bennett calls "doing something about" – on the part of individual social actors. It can be expanded, as Bennett does in his account of the adaptive strategies of various subgroups on the Canadian plains, to speak of the purposive behavior of social groups (1969). The concept

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reminds us of something most people realize about their own social realities, but which has often been lost in the common attempt by social scientists to impose overly neat structures upon societies. This is that social reality is composed of individuals acting in groups and sometimes alone, who through their cultures (which in complex societies are "messy" in that they contain degrees of confusion and contradiction) attempt to make sense of the world around them, and using that sense of understanding attempt to do something about their situations. Out of these anything but smooth processes we may as social scientists be able to observe emergent patterns. Indeed, social groups may "pickle" successful emergent patterns as values and associated symbolic representations which help enculturate succeeding generations with the strategies. The "church bell" proverb, this book's title comes from, is a folkloric statement of the long-term peasant adaptive strategy in Locorotondo.

Further, the adaptive strategy concept moves the notion of adaptation away from a simplistic dichotomy between environment which must be adapted to and society which must do the adapting. Clearly groups must adopt adaptive strategies with respect to other groups, both near and distant (to the bureaucracies of nation states, for instance), as much as they must adapt to physical environmental conditions and changes in them. Particular adaptive strategies, as historian William Cronon has shown, may change environments in such a way as to require further changing strategies (1983). The notion opens the way for a connection between environmental anthropology, from which it comes, and the consideration of relationships between local places and broader, even global, political economic systems.

The concept is especially useful for analyzing social settings in which class and power relationships are central to social process. In such cases it can be used dialectically to analyze the purposive strategies of those groups who have power, taking into consideration their interests (which may be culturally or situationally defined). It can then be used to analyze how those with less power adapt or react to the actions of more powerful groups or to external factors. The broad concept of "strategy" allows us to deal both with higher class attempts at manipulation and exploitation and with subordinate actions mounted to cope with them, evade them, or reverse them. The concept does not assume that groups with differing interests end up in symbiotic relationships. The concept differs from the functionalist

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approach to adaptation which focuses too much on the notion of supposed equilibria reached through the process of adaptation in a system, and too little on the process itself. In fact, adaptive strategies may be unsuccessful after very little time or short sighted over the long run. They are also likely to have unexpected consequences for those who adopt them. I have kept these considerations in mind in my description of the historical development of settlement and agricultural patterns in Locorotondo.

The concept of adaptive strategy also unlocks the scholar from the assumption that ethnographers during their seasons in the field must somehow represent a describable structure instead of a process of change. Although anthropologists who have studied Italy are no strangers to historical methods and analysis, and those who have adopted such approaches have arrived at them from other theoretical directions, the adaptive strategy concept virtually demands a diachronic approach.

Emphyteusis was an adaptive strategy adopted at various times and in various places by landowners during the long history of Southern Italy and this book chronicles the case of the town of Locorotondo and its environs. Both lay and ecclesiastical landholders adopted emphyteusis at several moments in the area's history, but most particularly from the late eighteenth century through the beginning decades of the twentieth. It cannot be said that those landholders directly followed Genovesi's advice (although it is entirely possible that some were aware of it), because emphyteusis had been adopted as a strategy locally before he wrote, particularly by ecclesiastical institutions.

Moreover, Locorotondo and surrounding municipalities provide an interesting situation in which to observe the consequences of landowners and peasants following such a strategy. A thesis of this book will be, therefore, that the settlement pattern and development characteristic of this part of the Murgia dei Trulli are the result of a local landowning class strategy to realize income from a landscape which was agriculturally marginal, and which could only be made productive through massive amounts of intensive peasant labor, which was unaffordable directly, but capturable through emphyteusis and the incentives for peasant investment it offered. The adaptive strategies of landowners, however, called forth peasant counter-strategies, and the unique landscape and peasant culture of Locorotondo must be seen as dynamically related to such strategies, and

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have been created by them. Indeed, "to eat a piece of bread," the peasants of Locorotondo decided to *live* "far from the church bells," not merely commute to the fields as did their counterparts in most other towns. Unlike the upper Italian "classic" *mezzadria* pattern, nothing in the contracts directly compelled them to do so.

Part III of this book concerns the social, cultural, and political implications of the dispersed small proprietor peasant adaptive strategy. For the most part, this section relies upon oral historical material to reach into the past from the present. Documentary evidence tells little about peasant social structure in the deeper past, with the exception of information about marriage settlement. Decisions, made initially at the individual household level, but eventually made by the whole of the town's peasantry, were economic. However, as more and more families followed, and as the dispersed settlement pattern grew into a cultural expectation and was no longer a conscious individual strategy, certain characteristics of peasant social structure, with specific rules about inheritance, welfare of family members, authority, and relationships with neighbors, evolved to fit. Furthermore, the move of the peasantry of this small Apulian center to rural dwellings had certain implications with respect to the nature of power in local social organization. As I will show, in the early nineteenth century, as the local bourgeoisie became aware of the change underway, it reacted by trying to move the peasantry back within the town walls forcibly, probably in an attempt to recoup lost house rents. Later, particularly in the post-Second World War era, peasant suffrage meant that would-be political leaders needed to capture the rural vote, and that they needed to evolve specific political strategies for attracting or coercing rural folk into their party camps.

Lastly, the discussion will turn to some comparative matters. I will consider the significance of the Locorotondese case in the context of trying to define some kinds of peasantries in the *mezzogiorno*, and discuss the degree to which Locorotondo's peasantry shaped its countryside by comparing their experience with that of several other peasantries sharing potentially similar characteristics.

Unfortunately undertaking field and archival research forces certain decisions about what matters can be investigated thoroughly and what must be more lightly probed. Similarly, conveying the results of a research project becomes subject to certain practical and thematic limits about what can be included. In this book I have focused upon settlement pattern, agriculture, social organization, and peasant/town

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