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978-0-521-10387-9 - The House that Giacomo Built: History of an Italian Family,  
1898-1978

Donald S. Pitkin

Excerpt

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## Prologue

I was unprepared for what I saw when I drove into Giacomo's yard on Sunday, January 23, 1977. I had been out of touch with the Rossi family for some time. I had sent a telegram from Rome saying that I would be down for the day, but it had not arrived. Maria was hanging out the wash. She was surprised to see me but not unduly so; life is full of the unpredictable. We embraced. Giulia Tassoni, her mother, appeared at the door, a frail figure in black, one hand holding the door frame for support; tears filled her eyes. Giovanni Battista Tassoni, her husband, had died since I had seen her last. After our sorrowful greeting I asked, "Where is Giacomo?" expecting to see his portly figure appear at the door. "He is working on the house with Luigi. Come, I will show you," Maria said. We started out the yard and down the dirt road that runs by the canal. "Giacomo has been working hard to finish it, for Luigi is getting married this summer to Silvia, a girl from Sessa," Maria explained as I, looking up, saw it, a house four times as large as their own, two stories high, surmounted by a handsome red-tiled pitched roof. It was impressive, the kind a successful California businessman might aspire to in midlife. My anthropological interest was strongly piqued by the fact that here was a modern family enjoying greater prosperity than it ever had before, planning a future centered on a variation of an extended family.

We met Giacomo coming toward us down the short piece of road that separated the houses, covered from head to foot with plaster. I could see that he was older, graying at the temples, his comfortable paunch protruding a bit more. We embraced and he asked after my children, Steve and Roxie. We returned to the house, where Giacomo cleaned up and Maria took her scissors to the hen run to dispatch one for the midday meal. The eldest son, Luigi, came in to greet me, now a full-grown man with a moustache; he told me that he would show me

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the house after we had finished eating. I congratulated him on his impending marriage. Teresa, seventeen, and her younger sister Caterina, thirteen, drove up to the front door on the moped. They had been sent for fresh bread, cheese, and olives. Teresa had become a pretty, vivacious young lady. Caterina was more reserved with me. Bruno, their younger son, was in the military in northern Italy, Maria told me. She showed me a snapshot of him leaning against a tank, the military beret cocked at a jaunty angle on his head. Later Giacomo said he was going to add two floors onto his own house to make a home for Bruno.

Maria laid a place for me at the head of the table. I looked at the kitchen, which I remembered from a visit I had made six years ago with my son, Steve, for the celebration of the fiftieth wedding anniversary of Giovanni and Giulia. The table around which we sat was the same, as were the cupboard full of Maria's best cups, Giacomo's bottles of liquors, and Maria's purse, where the family money is kept. I remembered the refrigerator, the spotless gas stove, and the TV on the cupboard placed so that they could watch the evening news, but the freezer in the corner was new. Maria said that Luigi, who works in the frozen food depository plant, had given it to her last year. She opened it, Giulia's eyes following her every move, took out some frozen greens from the garden, and moved toward the stove. Giacomo slapped her behind playfully from where he sat at the side of the table. She cuffed him in return, as a large smile wreathed her face.

For a moment I had to pinch myself to realize where I was in time and space. I didn't feel that old but I understood, as if for the first time, that I had known these people for twenty-six years; more than a quarter of a century had passed since I first sat with my late wife, Emily, in Giulia's smoke-blackened kitchen in their old house in the village. It was June 1951. I remember Giulia leaning over the open fire stirring the pasta in the pot, while the sauce bubbled in the small earthenware bowl on a tripod snuggled up to the coals. Maria, then twenty-one, was grating cheese at the table. Giacomo, her dark, handsome young suitor, sat silently on a chair by the fire, stealing glances from time to time in her direction. Giovanni, a manual laborer, was recalling experiences from his great adventure, the two years spent working in Argentina, from 1926 to 1928. By the time the pasta was on the table we had been joined by Salvatore, then twenty-three, a manual laborer like his father; Pasquale, eighteen, a tailor's apprentice; Tonino, thirteen, and Michele, six. Michele we discovered was not Giulia's son but the illegitimate child of Concetta, their firstborn, who lived with her second husband, Felice, a night watchman in Piove di Sacco, near Padua. In the days to come the story of the betrayal of the family by Concetta's first husband

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was to be painfully and bitterly revealed. The shame that Giovanni and Giulia felt was still deeply palpable.

That evening we learned that Giovanni and Giulia Tassoni were both born around the turn of the century in Stilo, Calabria, and had brought their then family of four to Valmonte in 1933 to improve their lot. It was when the Fascist regime was embarked on a massive project to reclaim the Pontine Marshes for farming. It became clear, as they spoke, that although they would never have returned to the harsh land of Calabria, they were proud of their Calabrian heritage; they would never renounce it. For the Tassoni family life since 1933 in Valmonte had been a long struggle, and even now in 1951 times were hard everywhere.

From that day in June to the following July of 1952 we saw a good deal of the Tassoni family, especially Maria. She cooked lunch for us every day over the fire in our house, and often Giacomo would come to visit in the evening. We had settled in Valmonte for a year, a year that was to become eighteen months by the time we left in the late summer of 1952. A graduate student in anthropology at Harvard, I had come to study Valmonte as a community with a particular interest in the relationship between land tenure and family organization. I was struck by the fact that most households among the poor villagers, who were largely agricultural day laborers, seemed to be made up of nuclear families. But when some were granted new farms created by the reclamation of the marshes an interesting thing happened. In the course of time the head of the family would build an addition or even another house on the land for a married son to live in. The extension of households seemed like turning the clock back to an earlier agricultural time when land ownership both necessitated and permitted the co-residence of multiple families on the land. In a sense an important goal of the reclamation of the marshes for the Fascists was just that: a turning back of the clock to create a peasant population attached to the soil, politically conservative, and grateful and loyal to the regime. I wondered, as I later finished the analysis, what would happen to the impetus toward familial extension as the area became industrialized, as surely it was bound to. One plant, the French-controlled Accord factory, was already producing transistors. A common assumption, for which there seemed to be a good deal of evidence in the industrial West, was that industry had a corrosive effect on composite family organization. It was held that industrialism and nuclear families seemed to go together like fire and smoke.

After lunch I walked with Giacomo and Luigi to see the new house; Maria and the girls remained behind to clean up. There was still a lot of

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interior work to do, but Luigi showed me the finger-tip action on the sliding garage door on the ground level. Giacomo was proud of the exterior steps leading to a balcony on the second floor and to the front door. I was not prepared for the living room—it was immense—nor for the two bathrooms, one beside the other—one for Luigi and Silvia, the other for their children.

It was while we were slowly returning the few yards to Giacomo's house that it suddenly came upon me: I would have to return in my forthcoming sabbatical year to Valmonte, to the Rossi family, for there was a story worth telling—two stories, in effect. One, a domestic history of this family triggered by my esteem for them; the second, flowing from the first, would attempt to explain what I saw happening that day, a man building houses for his married sons so that they might live nearby rather than encouraging them to leave, to become “independent,” as is the wont among most parents in Western industrialized societies. I did return and I did embark upon the writing of that story.

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## Introduction

An anthropologist's use of oral history constitutes one of those methodological and conceptual modes in which anthropology and history meet: an outcome of the more recent confrontation between the anthropologist and literate and hierarchical society. From its inception anthropology worked within the confines of an oral tradition: Rich in received wisdom but bereft of historical documents these cultures invited the anthropologist to focus on the present rather than the past. Questions of cultural derivation were undertaken by ethnohistory, involving painstaking reconstructions of distinct cultures and cultural patterns.

Before the Second World War the universe of anthropological investigation was almost exclusively that of preliterate peoples. After the war fieldwork began to include complex societies as well and the study of peasant populations within their midst. Then anthropologists, long accustomed to cultural homogeneity, had to begin to take into account social heterogeneity, dealing as they were with partial societies within larger nation-states. In time it became clear that what was being observed, both with respect to social organization as well as personal behavior, was as much a function of class specificity as cultural uniqueness. For the most part, working in that setting anthropologists undertook community studies of rural peoples, employing the traditional methods of fieldwork supplemented by other documentation: vital statistics, thematic apperception tests, film, and so on. But community studies organize the present without accounting for the past. This bias for the present resulted partly from the fact that anthropology had come into being through its engagement with "timeless societies." Not only were anthropologists ill-equipped methodologically and theoretically to undertake the burden of historical analysis of complex societies, but they appropriately felt that task better left to historians. And yet the very people that anthropologists

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have turned their attention to—people marginal to history—have been ignored by traditional history.<sup>1</sup>

History, as we have known it, has been a function of those privileged to have made a difference in the observable course of events. The lives and actions of ordinary people, lacking social visibility, have not been entered in the written record. For history is the possession of those who by casting light on themselves obscure others and thus justify their own existence. The sharp contrast between the few who stand in the light and the many in the shadows is to be found in Valmonte itself, home of a noble family, illustrious since the time of the medieval papacy. Their vast palace in Rome contains a magnificent library where scholars work on medieval family documents. The fact that the last remaining member died recently makes no difference at all upon the course of the research. What does matter is that they of titled blood were the only Valmontesi who made history, which was materialized in thousands of documents and personal memoirs.

It is another thing to reconstruct the story of a working-class family who did not make history but whose progenitors lived during the same historical period. Oral history, attending as it may to women, minority-group members, and workers, is not in and of itself a final corrective to the inequities of omission and commission made by traditional history, but it is a step in the direction of lifting a silence imposed upon them.

More than a decade has passed since Allan Nevins instituted the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, and oral history has come of age, with a professional association and journal both in North America and Great Britain. Its practitioners are many and diverse, and its detractors remain skeptical if not adamant. Among historians it is seen as a way of more richly informing the written record—a valuable supplement. But where no such documentation exists it becomes the sole vehicle for reconstruction. In that instance historians find themselves in a situation long familiar to anthropologists bereft of the sense of authority that the written word can bestow. How does one know who and what to believe? Answers to those questions can only, at best, be partial, for they apply to the evaluation of written materials as well.

But the issue of the verification of oral data is not so important as the question of where history resides within that data. History is created not by the actions of historical actors themselves, nor by documents themselves, no matter how critical, but by the imposition of meaning upon them by historians. History begins when historians begin to think and write about the past. And so it is for oral historians too, except for one important difference: They are engaged with another living consciousness, the interviewee, in the act of historical reconstruction. What transpires between the historian and the interviewee is a conversational

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narrative, the telling of a tale.<sup>2</sup> The goal of this interchange is neither the establishment of fact nor causal explanation but elaboration, for in this context of mutuality the historian is pulled in the direction of Geertz's "thick description," where the aim of anthropology (history) becomes "the enlargement of the universe of human discourse."<sup>3</sup>

It was in this spirit that I asked questions of Giulia, Maria, Giacomo, and the others. Certainly I was interested in establishing a chronology of their lives, but my curiosity went beyond that to evoke their sentiments about what had befallen them. And what comes out of that critical dialogue is their form of historical consciousness, a consciousness that speaks to their own situation on the one hand and to that of the larger community on the other.<sup>4</sup> Shaped by their circumstances, it touches upon the outlook of other working-class people who find in their struggle more of a commonality than an individuation of purpose. It is not a tale of personal misfortune, for Giacomo's difficulties in finding work are perceived as belonging to matters beyond his control rather than an estimation of personal failure. (Indeed, where a consciousness of extreme individuation does not prevail, unemployment is less devastating than in the United States, where individuals assume responsibility for their own oppression.)<sup>5</sup> Above all else their story is seen by them as a continual act of sacrifice undertaken with patience and forbearance. *Sacrificare*, to sacrifice in the sense of sacrificing oneself for others, is an expression heard time and again in this household.

"To sacrifice for your children is a parent's lot," says Maria. Giulia nods her head vigorously in affirmation and hardly begins on her own litany of sacrificial acts when Maria interrupts her. "I always think," she says, "that one day Giacomo and I will go somewhere in the car just for the fun of it. We never drive anywhere together except to the cemetery to lay flowers on Papa's grave or to see Concetta when she is sick." Maria knows deep in her heart that they will never take that trip, for does not one responsibility follow another like day follows night?

When the traveling Neapolitan salesman stops with his truck invitingly full of toweling, sheeting, and bolts of bright cloth, Maria quickly hugs a piece of flowered cotton to her front but with a laugh and dismissive gesture lays it down, knowing that more towels and sheets for Teresa's and Caterina's trousseaux come first. What one does one does for others, or so it is perceived. Giacomo in his place at the table muses aloud about the next tasks he must undertake: reset the tiles over the kitchen sink in Luigi's house, or begin on Bruno's stairs. In both the myth and reality of otherness, there are seeds of an antihegemonic consciousness. The disposition of Giacomo and Maria's time and their affirmation of responsibility communicate a commitment to family without at the same time incurring allegiance to

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authority. The Rossi family is not a template of that familism dear to the heart of the nationalist state. Its adherence to otherness is also incommensurate with the self-serving ideals of an advanced Western society at the same time that its growth provides the space for resistance to domination. Oral history can reveal those exemplifications of popular consciousness critical for our understanding of that universe which hegemony attempts to subsume.

If oral history is a genre, a way of doing history, family history is a subject of investigation. Although what I have done here assumes the methodology of oral history, its content partakes of family history. With very few exceptions (*Hanna's Daughters* by Dorothy Gallagher is one), family history has made little use of personal recall.<sup>6</sup> Rather it has employed "hard data"—census materials, church and civic records of vital statistics, and so on—ever since such information was first systematically gathered. Its purpose has been the reconstitution of familial forms in order to better understand the rhythms of change and constancy over time.

Much of the present argumentation about the alleged earlier existence of large-scale extended families, most especially among rural peoples and their eventual substitution by the small conjugal family, goes back to the work of Frederic Le Play (1806-1882), French administrator and social reformist.<sup>7</sup> In Le Play's eyes the weakening of the moral underpinnings of the nation resulted from the transformation of the stable patriarchal household into the unstable nuclear family.

But the more recent heightening of interest in family history in the 1960s was derived, largely, from the work of another Frenchman, the demographer Louis Henry. Although not a historian, Henry turned to historical demography in order to obtain information on natural fertility (fertility unlimited by birth control). Henry applied the techniques of reconstitution (the process of reconstructing the demographic history of particular families) to estimate fertility and mortality rates.<sup>8</sup>

In the English-speaking world family reconstitution has found an articulate spokesman in E. A. Wrigley at the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. Although he has used the technique of reconstitution in examining certain events in particular groups through time, his fellow worker Peter Laslett often employed an aggregate analysis focusing on the same events at one point in time, providing a snapshot rather than a developmental perspective.<sup>9</sup> But if the Cambridge Group has borrowed one of its methodologies from Henry, their theoretical concerns stem more from a concern with Le Play and what they perceive to be his ideological commitment to the virtues of extended households. One of the main concerns of the Cambridge Group has been to dispel the myth of the historical primacy of



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the extended family (the “Classical Family of Western Nostalgia,” as William Goode has described it)<sup>10</sup> and this is done by dealing with actual family behavior rather than with idealizations made about it. Laslett’s findings for one hundred communities in preindustrial England reveal that household size remained fairly constant from the sixteenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth. “There is no sign,” Laslett contends, “of the large, extended coresidential family group of the traditional peasant world giving way to the small, nuclear, conjugal household of modern industrial society.”<sup>11</sup> At the end of his introduction to *Household and Family in Past Time* (1972) Laslett asserts that a belief in the existence of extended families in earlier times resides alone “in the heads of the social scientists themselves.”<sup>12</sup> The view that households of small size existed well before the industrial revolution has found support in Dupâquier and Jadin’s study of Corsican households, in van der Woude’s investigation of family structure in the Noorderkwartier district of the province of Holland, and in Hélin’s study of Liège.<sup>13</sup>

But since the publication of *Household and Family in Past Time* in 1972 a challenge to an exclusive emphasis on family composition and structure has come from a number of quarters. Most critical of Laslett has been the historian Lutz Berkner. What constitutes a meaningful household, Berkner argues, must reflect native perception and not the narrow definition of an outside observer.<sup>14</sup> Berkner shows that in the case of Austrian peasants, living under the same roof “is not the essential or even an adequate criterion for defining the household.”<sup>15</sup> Of more general interest, though, is Berkner’s contention that Laslett found the nuclear family to be ubiquitous because he disregarded the familial life cycle. Relying largely upon aggregate analysis, Laslett obscured the extent to which the nuclear family is often a phase in the developmental cycle of more complex family forms, Berkner argues.<sup>16</sup>

The year 1983 saw the publication of a new volume by the Cambridge Group entitled *Family Forms in Historic Europe*. Responding to the criticism of the ensuing years, it purports to be more attentive to the life cycle of the family than did the 1972 book and, equally important, recognizes the significance of regional variation in household organization in Europe. In 1972 Laslett stressed the contrast between nuclearity in the West and extension in the East. In 1983 he recognized the need for a fourfold division: West, West/central or middle, the Mediterranean, and the East; with the Mediterranean falling in the middle of a continuum stretching from the small Western household to the large multiple one of the East.<sup>17</sup> Laslett’s representative date for the Mediterranean comes from central and northern Italy in the form of two studies undertaken in Emilia Romagna, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia,

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where extended families were found to be commonplace—one by Angeli and Belletini and one by Morassi.<sup>18</sup> Speaking of the data gathered by Morassi for late nineteenth-century Fagagna Laslett writes, “That the proportion of complex households (extended plus multiple) should rise in the village by one fifth between 1870 and 1890 . . . may still surprise us after all that has been recently published against earlier suppositions that kin complexity decreases over time, especially as industrialization sets in.”<sup>19</sup> As it was Laslett who proclaimed the ubiquity of the preindustrial nuclear family, to now find “kin complexity” occurring with the advent of industrialism in central Italy is to call into question contentions of convergence between industrialism and specified familial forms. Indeed, the most intensive historical study of urban family forms is that undertaken by Michael Anderson for nineteenth-century Preston, a small Lancashire cotton mill city, and it reveals a significant increase in the co-residence of married couples and their parents on the part of its working-class population.<sup>20</sup>

It is obvious from the work of the last decade in family history that large-scale generalizations concerning industrialism are hardly useful in accounting for the forms that households may assume in any one place or time. And so it is encouraging to see the Cambridge Group calling (with some qualification) for the research of particular cases. The formation of households reflects the play of multiple forces and does not readily lend itself to linear or monocausal explanations. Furthermore, generalizations about the impact of industrialism upon kinship systems need to differentiate between the consequences for unilineal systems as opposed to bilateral ones for, as Rosenberg and Anspach have pointed out, the effect upon the former is always more significant than upon the latter.<sup>21</sup>

To arrive closer to Valmonte and to an understanding of the construction of the houses by Giacomo for his married sons, we need to move beyond the Cambridge Group’s identification of a Mediterranean region manifesting a high degree of kin complexity and follow the way taken for the most part by anthropologists who have reported on family organization in Italy. It is commonplace among them to see a rather clear division between nuclearity in the south and extension in central and northern Italy. The thesis has been most succinctly put forth by Sydel Silverman, who has undertaken work in Tuscany. Essentially it has been argued that poverty of resources available to peasants in the south has selected against the formation of extended families, whereas in central and northeastern Italy, land tenure patterns allocated sufficient property to make possible the creation of large-scale multiple-family households.<sup>22</sup> Examining studies done from the south to the north, that generalization seems largely to hold true. Schneider and Schneider as