I

Introduction

I
The historical anthropology of early modern Italy

What is historical anthropology?

These essays on early modern Italy are offered as an example of 'historical anthropology'. The term has come into use in the last decade or so to refer to the work of Carlo Ginzburg, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Keith Thomas and a number of others. Is it anything more than a fashionable new term for social history? If so, what is distinctive about it?

I do not want to overemphasise the uniformity or the intellectual coherence of a movement which has appealed to different historians for different reasons. Some historical anthropologists are especially concerned with symbolism, others with material life; some with theory and comparison, others with local particulars. Despite the diversity of its practitioners, however, the term 'historical anthropology' does describe a distinctive approach to history. Five features in particular distinguish it from other kinds of social history.

1. Much recent work in social history has attempted to describe general trends on the basis of quantitative evidence; but historical anthropology is deliberately qualitative and concentrates on specific cases.

2. Many works of social history describe the lives of millions of people. Works of historical anthropology, however, are often deliberately microscopic and focus on small communities, such as Le Roy Ladurie's Montaillou, in order to achieve greater depth as well as more colour and life.

3. Many social historians offer causal explanations of trends over time, explanations which contemporaries would not have understood, concerned with trends of which they were often unaware. By contrast, historical anthropologists concentrate on what, following Clifford Geertz (1973) is often called 'thick description', in other words the interpretation of social interaction in a given society in terms of that society's own norms and categories.

4. The place of symbolism in everyday life has tended to be neglected

by both cultural historians (concerned with 'works of art') and social historians (concerned with social 'reality'). Historical anthropologists, on the other hand, make it one of their central concerns, and try to show, for example, how 'apparently trivial routines and rituals have an important role in maintaining or enforcing a certain world view' (Löfgren, 1981). Hence they have paid attention to the significance of the clothes people wear, the food they eat, the ways in which they address one another, and the manner in which they hold themselves, gesture, or walk.

5. Social history is informed – directly or indirectly – by the theories of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Historical anthropologists tend to be interested in theory, but their 'great tradition' runs from Emile Durkheim, through Arnold van Gennep (1908) on 'rites of passage' and Marcel Mauss (1923–4) on the meaning of gifts, to contemporary figures such as Geertz, Victor Turner and Pierre Bourdieu, and historical analysis would benefit if it drew more heavily on this tradition.

These contrasts should not be exaggerated. Quantitative and qualitative, microsocial and macrosocial approaches to the past are, or at any rate should be, complementary not contradictory, for case-studies are needed to show how major trends affected the lives of individuals, while statistical analysis is required to show that the cases discussed are really typical, and of what. Was Montaillou, for example, a typical medieval village? A typical Mediterranean village? A typical Languedoc village? Or was it not typical at all?

The contrast which has just been drawn between sociology and social anthropology was never all that clear and it has become increasingly blurred. Durkheim can be claimed for both disciplines. The Chicago school of symbolic interactionism was a movement within sociology which emphasised small groups, symbolism, and the importance of the participants' (or 'actors') own definitions of the situation. Erving Goffman, who owed a good deal to this tradition, is another figure who can equally well be claimed for anthropology or sociology. In any case, in calling this volume of essays a study in historical anthropology, I have no intention of rejecting either the global (macroscopic) view or quantitative methods (where these are appropriate). The point of the title is essentially that the historical problems discussed in the essays, on the border between traditional 'social' and traditional 'cultural' history, are ones which yield with least difficulty to a microscopic, qualitative approach.

As for perception and communication, these themes are central to any idea of culture, vague or precise, wide or narrow, high or low.

Structuralists regard culture as a communication system, a language (with its 'grammars' or rules for eating food, wearing clothes, and so on), or a 'system of signs', which can be 'read' like a text. As a cultural historian I have found some of these ideas stimulating and suggestive; the idea, for example that 'a sign or symbol only acquires meaning when it is discriminated from some other contrary sign or symbol' (Leach, 1976, p. 49), does help make sense of many phenomena in early modern Europe, from conspicuously splendid palaces to aggressively simple rituals.

The stumbling-block for historians who try to come to terms with the ideas of the structuralists is their wilful lack of concern with change, local context and individual intentions. To historians it seems obvious that the meaning of a sign changes in the course of time, varies with the situation in which it is used, and may be manipulated by the individual using it – which is not to deny the possibility of the sign in some sense manipulating the user. The essay on the art of insult (ch. 8 below) is an attempt to show both processes at work.

If they had not reacted against common-sense views, the structuralists would not have achieved their new insights. All the same, it is worth asking whether they may not have over-reacted, or, more constructively, whether it may be possible to domesticate the structuralist mind, to write the history of the 'grammar' of a culture and relate it to the messages emitted by individuals using this grammar, and the perception and interpretation of these messages by their recipients. This approach to culture as a communication system has the advantage of allowing historians to discuss the relation between specific texts or artifacts and the society in which they were produced without assuming that culture is some kind of 'superstructure', as the Marxists used to say, which simply reflects the 'real' changes taking place below.

Anthropologists have much to say about both perception and communication. On the perception side, they have suggested that what we rather too easily call 'social reality' should be regarded as no more than a shared image, what Durkheim used to call a 'collective representation'. Gender, for example, or illness – however natural they appear everywhere – are cultural 'constructions' in the sense that the characteristics attributed to sickness and health, males and females, vary from one culture to another. Hence 'man' and 'woman', 'healer' and 'sufferer' are social roles which have to be learned (Ortner and Whitehead, 1981; Kapferer, 1983). Again, it has been argued by a sociologist of the symbolic interaction school that 'social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to

particular people and labelling them as outsiders' (Becker, 1963). The outsiders may be madmen (Foucault, 1961), witches (Cohn, 1975) or beggars (below, ch. 6). The 'thick description' of the anthropologists may be redefined as a form of translation, a making explicit, for the benefit of non-members, of the rules implicit in a given culture.

These 'rules', it should be pointed out, do not determine behaviour. They may be broken (at the price of giving offence). In practice they are applied flexibly rather than mechanically. There may not be a complete consensus in a given society as to what these rules are. The idea of rules remains a useful one, and so does the attempt to tell the modern reader how he or she would have been expected to behave in another century; how to be polite, for example, or how to be insulting, how to be a thief, how to be a saint (below, chs. 5–8). This approach is not unlike a literary and art-historical tradition of studying the making, survival and breaking of stereotypes, a tradition associated with the Warburg Institute (Warburg, 1893; Gombrich, 1960; Baxandall, 1972). Perception has a history.

Forms of communication such as rituals are a long-standing interest of anthropologists, but communication became a centre of attention when they broke with the tradition of functionalism, in other words the study of the manner in which ideas and institutions are related to one another within a social (or cultural) system. This approach seemed to discourage any awareness of conflict or change, and it has been replaced by one which stresses process and views society in terms of interaction or 'transaction' (Barth, 1967, Kapferer, 1976). It was at the time of this debate, and in this context, that a group of American scholars established the discipline variously known as the sociology of language or the ethnography of communication, defined as the study of messages (or 'communicative events'), their channels and codes, senders and receivers, occasions and settings (Hymes 1964), or, more briefly, 'Who speaks what language to whom and when?' (Fishman, 1965). A classic example – of obvious relevance to historians of Italy – is an essay with the intriguing title, 'How to ask for a drink in Subanun', which is in fact a discussion of the whole complex of conventions surrounding drinking in that culture (Frake, 1964).

It is from this ethnographical perspective that I wish to look at various kinds of communicative event in early modern Italy, including speech and writing, politeness and insult, texts and images, official rituals and unofficial ones. My vocabulary of analysis will draw on this tradition as on that of symbolic interactionism, and terms such as 'transaction', 'negotiation', 'definition of the situation', 'presentation of self' and

'social drama' will recur in these pages. However, I shall try to integrate this approach with a cultural historian's concern with changes in symbolism over time, over some three or four hundred years (the essays focus on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but move earlier or later as the subject requires).

The urban mosaic

These essays are not concerned with the whole of early modern Italy (ten million or more people at any one time, 90% of them living in the countryside), but with a few of the largest cities: with Milan, Genoa, Venice, Florence, Rome and Naples. A historical anthropology of Italian peasant society would be well worth attempting, but the attempt will not be made here (for further information, see Doria, 1968; McArdle, 1978). To study these cities, the concepts developed by urban sociologists and anthropologists have proved to be particularly useful.

In the 1920s, the leader of the so-called 'Chicago School' of urban sociology, Robert Park, recommended 'fieldwork' in the streets. 'The same patient methods of observation', he wrote,

> which anthropologists like Boas and Lowie have expended on the study of the life and manners of the American Indian might be even more fruitfully employed in the investigation of the customs, beliefs, social practices and general conceptions of life prevalent in Little Italy or the Lower North Side in Chicago, or in recording the more sophisticated folkways of the inhabitants of Greenwich Village and the neighbourhood of Washington Square, New York. (Park, 1916).

Over the last quarter-century or so, as the Third World has become hyper-urbanised, Park's advice has been taken more seriously. Social anthropologists have been turning their attention to the city, and a considerable body of work now exists dealing with the life of migrants and with their urban 'villages'. Some of it is of great interest to anyone concerned with perception and communication.

The crucial point was made by Park when he described the city, in a memorable phrase, as 'a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not penetrate'. 'Space speaks' as one anthropologist puts it (Hall, 1959, ch. 10), and territoriality is particularly audible, or visible, in the city. All the Italian cities which will be discussed below were divided into social zones. In Florence, the parish of San Frediano was a low-rent area inhabited by the lowest-paid workers in the cloth industry (readers of the novels

of Vasco Pratolini will recall that the district was still a working-class one after the Second World War). In Rome, Trastevere was a poor quarter in early modern times as in classical antiquity; its very name reminds us that it was on the wrong side of the Tiber. In Naples, Piazza Lavinaro, Piazza Mercato, and Piazza Selleria formed a poor quarter which was the main setting for the revolt of Masaniello (below, ch. 14). The upper classes also had their zones. In Venice, for example, the patricians took over the main square, Piazza San Marco, between five and eight in the evening, thus giving a clear answer to the question, Whose City? Nobles did not like commoners to come too close, and a Genoese patrician records smugly in his diary that he told someone who did this 'you don't see me' (*non mi vedi*), and then 'gave him a good slap' (*gli diedi un buon schiaffo*), following it up with his dagger when the man resisted. He clearly felt that what Goffman calls the 'territories of the self' had been invaded.[1]

The territorial imperative may have been particularly strong among Genoese patricians, for some of them laid claim to particular squares, which would have been public space in other cities. Piazza San Matteo, for example, was Doria territory, while Piazza San Luca was in dispute in 1565 between the Spinola and the Grimaldi, each clan claiming the right to light a bonfire there to celebrate St John's Eve, and of course to symbolise their possession (Grendi, 1975). This was an extreme case, but territorial conflicts between nobles seem to have been commonplace in the late Middle Ages, when the proliferation of noble towers gave most Italian cities the appearance which only San Gimignano retains today, and chains were regularly stretched across the streets to repel cavalry (Heers, 1974, 146f).

Another point to make about the 'urban mosaic' is the coexistence of what Park called 'contiguous but otherwise widely separated worlds', or sub-cultures. In the city, the individual's status was (and is) largely determined by what Park called 'front'; in other words by clothes, gestures, expression, accent and other conventional signs. These signs are described in detail in the literature of the picaresque, in which the rogue hero learns to move quickly from one urban sub-culture to another and so to 'pass' for what he is not. This literature was created and developed in early modern Spain, but it was sometimes set in Italian cities and it was in any case much appreciated in Italy, as the number of editions and translations shows (below, p. 66). In our own day the outstanding observer of this kind of 'impression management', as he called it, was Goffman, and it has been suggested that the city was the natural stage for his dramaturgical perspective (Hannerz, 1980).

Façades

If space speaks, and clothes communicate, it is obvious that different forms of speech, writing and ritual carry their own messages. The types of communication studied in this book could easily have been extended. It might, for example, have included tears, which may flow 'naturally' in most cases, but are governed by cultural conventions none the less. In early modern Italy, as in other parts of Europe at this time, it was neither unusual nor unseemly for men to weep in public, at least on certain kinds of occasion. An effective sermon on Christ's Passion, for example, was supposed to leave the congregation drying their eyes. In Florence at the end of the fifteenth century, the followers of fra Girolamo Savonarola, who was among other things an effective preacher, were nicknamed the 'snivellers' (*piagnoni*). Rage as well as piety could find expression in tears, as in the case of the quarrel between Nicholas of Cusa and pope Pius II recorded in the latter's autobiography (Book VII).

Joking is another form of communication, and the history of its conventions is only just beginning to be written (Thomas, 1977; Dekker and Roodenburg, 1984). They certainly differ a good deal from one period to another. If we were to visit early modern Italy, we might well find it difficult to adjust to a sense of humour which is now virtually confined to barracks (or its civilian equivalent, the college). Even at the court of Urbino, as described in Castiglione's *Courtier*, which is nothing if not idealised, pellets of bread were thrown at table. Practical jokes of different kinds were much enjoyed. Many sources confirm this propensity for *burle* or *beffe*, as these jokes were called. A comparison of the motifs of the Italian short story of the period, the *novella*, with those of folktales elsewhere suggests that the Italians were peculiarly fascinated by trickery and especially by the theme of the victim's humiliation (Rotunda, 1942). Practical jokes were literally built into Italian country houses such as the sixteenth-century Medici villa at Pratolino, where the host was able to drench his guests as they strolled in his garden, turning the spectators into the spectacle.[2]

The modern reader is likely to find both the joking and the weeping rather theatrical, at least if he or she belongs to a less demonstrative northern European culture. Goffman offered his analyses as if they were true of society in general, and he has a point; we all act in public, and perhaps in private as well. However, some societies, in some periods, seem to encourage this style of behaviour more than others, and the dramaturgical approach seems peculiarly appropriate to Italy in the early

modern period, the age of the Renaissance and the Baroque. Italy was a 'theatre society' (*società spettacolo*; Titone, 1978, p. 116), where it was necessary to play one's social role with style, *fare bella figura*, to work hard at creating and maintaining as well as saving 'face'. There is of course a danger for a northerner of seeing Italian society in stereotyped terms, so it is worth pointing out that awareness of the theatre of everyday life was expressed in the language of the time. In the autobiography, or better, the memories and reflections of the seventeenth-century Neapolitan lawyer Francesco D'Andrea, the author criticises a local noble who finds nothing better to do than to show himself off on the piazza (*andar facendo il bello in piazza*); on the other hand, he recommends a legal career to his nephews because it offers an opportunity 'for showing off one's talents' (*di far pompa del proprio talanto*).[3] In this respect, Italy was and is part of the wider Mediterranean culture. 'Here, if you don't show off, you are dead', as a Lebanese villager remarked to a visiting anthropologist (Gilsenan, 1976, p. 198). The Mediterranean world is a world where life (more exactly, male life) is lived in public, on the square, which is well adapted to both performance and observation.

In sixteenth-century Italy, the café did not exist. It arrived, with coffee, in the seventeenth century, and developed into a social institution – in Venice and Milan, at least – in the course of the eighteenth century. However, there were other forms of sociability. The nobles had their loggias or 'porticos' to meet in (different porticos for different factions in the case of Genoa and Naples), or they took over the public square for part of the day, as at Venice, for what was called the *broglio*, a political marketplace where deals were clinched to the accompaniment of many compliments and much bowing and hand-kissing.[4] Merchants too, had their public meeting-places, like the Rialto in Venice or the Mercato Nuovo in Florence, and here too bargaining would take place in the open, before the eyes of spectators. Respectable women were supposed to stay indoors, but they could always observe public life from their balconies.

In such an urban setting, religion was virtually bound to take on a particularly theatrical quality, whether in the Milan of San Carlo Borromeo (1538–84), the Rome of Bernini, or the Naples of the Jesuit missions of the middle of the seventeenth century. Solemn processions wound through the streets and squares on important occasions, while city centres were turned into sets for these performances by the erection of statues or crosses; thirty-three in Borromeo's Milan, to allow the Stations of the Cross to take place in the open (Buratti, 1982). Whole squares might be reconstructed for liturgical reasons, as in the famous case of

Bernini's Piazza San Pietro (below, p. 180). The processions themselves were highly dramatic affairs, at least in some instances. In Naples, during the Jesuit missions of the 1650s, men walked hatless – unusual in those days – and barefoot, 'with crowns of thorns on their heads, ropes round their necks, and bones, skulls or small crucifixes in their hands'. They whipped themselves or beat their breasts with stones until the blood flowed. The hell-fire sermons preached during the missions were also dramatic performances, accompanied by shouts as well as by music.[5]

In this case violence was turned inward, against the self. Equally spectacular, however, were its secular, outward forms, whether duels (in the case of nobles) or brawls (in the case of the lower classes). The records of many quarrels suggest that they had a distinctly theatrical quality. For example, in the journal kept by a Genoese patrician between 1583 and 1589, references to disputes between his peers are not infrequent. *E seguito una costione*, 'there followed a quarrel', is a recurrent entry. The diarist obviously considered these events to be memorable. However, the participants rarely got beyond 'giving the lie' (*una mentita*, cf. p. 96 below), and its reply, a slap on the face, before they were parted and peace was made by a third party. As another patrician observed a few years later, the Genoese do not like to fight.[6] The quarrels of the Genoese patricians, like the fights observed not long ago by an anthropologist on Tory Island, were usually no more than a stereotyped, ritualised sequence of words and gestures which could be all the more violent because the participants could count on being separated by their friends before blood really flowed (Fox, 1977; cf. Bourdieu, 1965, p. 201).

It was not only among the merchant patricians of Genoa that violence was ritualised. The cases of 'excess' (*eccesso*) and 'insolence' (*insolenze*), which came before the tribunal of the Governor of Rome in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (below, ch. 8), also have a stereotyped quality as if the actors were following a script, had rehearsed their parts and had their eyes at least as much on the audience as on one another. A quarrel had to begin dramatically, to attract bystanders. You might knock loudly, for example, on the door of your enemy's house, shouting insults or singing verses in his contempt at the top of your voice; or you might strut up and down the street, sword under arm, looking into the other man's shop each time you passed, an action which would lead naturally to the stereotyped sequence, 'What are you looking at?' 'I look at whatever I like' (*Io guardo quello che mi pare*). There was a special word for this kind of behaviour, which came into use in the sixteenth century: *bravare*.[7]

I would not wish to suggest that threats of violence were always empty;