Chapter 2

Pertosa and its inhabitants

The commune

Pertosa is a small rural commune in the centre of the region known as Basilicata in southern Italy. In 1961, it had a population of 4,290 inhabitants; territorially it covered an area of 8,927 hectares. These two elements, the population and the territory, form the commune, the smallest administrative unit recognised by the Italian state. Membership of the commune is determined by inscription in the *anagrafe*, the register of population. This right may be acquired by registration at birth, on a change of permanent residence, or in the town in which one works.

Within the commune a sharp distinction must be drawn between the settlement area and the surrounding countryside - between *paese* and *campagna*. *Paese* can be translated as either village or town. For Pertosa, the former is probably the more exact English equivalent, both on account of its small and relatively undifferentiated population, and because of its lack of civic amenities. Nevertheless, in comparison with village communities in northern Europe, it has a highly nucleated and densely populated 'urban' core, and provides a good example of the somewhat curious pattern of rural settlement which is found in many Mediterranean countries.

In the *Mezzogiorno*, scattered rural settlements, individual units composed of a farm house and surrounding fields belonging to it, so typical of much of western Europe, are rare. Instead, it is common to find what are sometimes called agro-towns, vast rural agglomerations of population, for the most part made up of peasants who travel daily between the town and their various plots of land, which are fragmented and scattered throughout the entire communal territory. In Puglia, some of these towns have a population of more than 50,000 inhabitants, and, although in Basilicata they tend to be smaller, agro-towns are still the predominant type. Except where there has been direct government intervention in the form of land redistribution and the creation of farm holdings, it is unusual to find more than a small proportion of the inhabitants of any commune living permanently in the countryside. Many reasons, most of them historical, have been postulated for this

form of settlement. It has been suggested that the turbulence of the Middle Ages with its Saracen invasions and baronial strife, and the continuance of brigandage until the end of the last century made it impossible to inhabit the countryside, and that safety was only to be had in numbers within the fortified or semi-fortified town. Others have seen the agro-town as a sanitary refuge from the ravages of malaria. Nowadays, as Rossi- Doria has pointed out, the main reason why peasants choose to live in such large towns is that they form the central points between their small fragmented plots of land.[12]

On a much smaller scale, Pertosa follows this general settlement pattern. In 1961, only 112 out of the 1,405 families living in the commune were permanently resident in the country, and 14 of these, non-local forestry officials, should be excluded.

Pertosa is built on the two spurs of a small hill. On the higher of them is the old village, which dates from the sixteenth century, dominated by the *Chiesa Madre*, the main parish church. On the other spur are the two 'new' quarters, built to accommodate a greatly increased population at the beginning and at the end of the last century. Between them is the *piazza*, the social, political and economic centre of the village. Nearby, are grouped the municipal buildings, the barracks of the *Carabinieri*, party political offices, the cinema, the main shops and the mansions of the three richest landowners. It is the *piazza*, and in the short stretch of road leading from it, that the male citizens of Pertosa take the *passeggiata*, the unhurried evening stroll. During the *passeggiata*, and afterwards as they sit in one of the village's many bars or clubs, they exchange gossip, make or break political pacts, discuss proposed marriages and, on occasion, hire and pay off labourers. Generally speaking the largest houses, belonging to the gentry and prosperous traders, are to be found near the *piazza*. As one moves away from it the large houses of the *borghesi* quickly give way to crowded clusters of peasant houses which extend to the edge of the village.

Nowadays, most villagers are anxious to emphasise the improvements which have taken place over the last ten years. They point to the increasing number of cars and motor-cycles which now fill the village square, the new blocks of flats on the outskirts, the modernisation of houses and shops along the main street. At the same time, however, there can be little doubt that this facade of recent prosperity conceals a great deal of squalor and poverty. In common with most other villages and towns in southern Italy, Pertosa has outgrown its water supply, and in summer months water is available for little more than an hour a day. Most houses are now supplied with electricity, but few have adequate sanitary arrangements. Flush-lavatories and running water are still comparatively rare, and it is still possible to find peasant

families that share a one-roomed house with their animals.

Villagers and Countrymen

One of the most important status distinctions in Pertosa is between *paesani* and *foresi* - between those who live in the village and those who live permanently in the country. The *forese* (the countryman; literally the outsider) is the object of scorn and derision, and is generally thought to be quarrelsome, uncivilised and politically unsophisticated. This, in discussing a proposed marriage between her son and a girl who came from the country, a neighbour of mine remarked, 'I know they are richer than we are, but they are far less civilised' (*sono molto meno civili*). In cases of this sort it is difficult to arrange a marriage unless there are definite material advantages to be gained by the party living in the village. A girl coming from the country would be obliged to bring a village house as part of her dowry; similarly placed, a man would have to have good prospects of inheriting land or cattle.

Many Pertosini recognise that living in the village restricts economic opportunities and output. As rural 'commuters' they are obliged to work their lands extensively, and although they are aware that they could increase economic returns by raising cattle or intensive farming, they are reluctant to engage in such enterprises, since they would require their continuous presence in the countryside. Indeed, this latter strategy is employed only by the poor and unsuccessful, and is generally reserved for periods of acute distress and hardship.

Most peasants claim that the economic advantages of living in the country are outweighed by the social and political privations it involves. In the first place, the country has few of the services and amenities which are offered by the village. There are no roads, electricity or medical services available, and rural schools are comparatively rare and badly organised. A peasant who falls ill has to travel into Pertosa on foot or on horseback, and to find a village house in which to stay. His children, if they are fortunate, may have a school near at hand, but since rural schools provide only the first five grades of elementary education, they will be obliged to move into the village if they intend to complete the eight years of compulsory education enjoined by the state.

Even more important are the political disadvantages of country life. *Foresi* are cut off from active participation in village politics, and are unable to create a network of friendship and patron-client ties which can be used for protection and support in their dealings with the outside world. Moreover, political deprivation of this sort has special significance in Pertosa, since it is commonly believed that success and social mobility are achieved by

manipulating one's social and political connections in the *paese*, and not by constant endeavour and hard work in agricultural or any other manual activities.[3] Good examples of countrymen's lack of political sophistication are provided by their somewhat pathetic attempts to bribe officials, and the ease with which they are deceived by local politicians. Bribery, in the sense of a cash reward for a political or bureaucratic service, is nowadays fairly rare in Pertosa. When it occurs, it usually involves a countryman who has no access to patron-client networks along which favours and rewards are normally channeled. Thus, during a recent election, I was told of a peasant who had been given a thousand lira to vote for a certain party. My informant, however, added that such behaviour was to be expected only from the soft-witted, or from people who had spent all their lives herding animals, and who knew nothing of the subtleties of village politics.

Campanilismo

The preference for living in the *paese*, the compact community, has its counterpart in a strong sense of local patriotism, or *campanilismo* as it is normally called. To be considered a member of the *paese*, a *paesano*, registration in the communal *anagrafe* is not enough; it is necessary to have been born there. Outsiders who come to live in Pertosa, and women from other villages who marry in, are invariably known by a nickname derived from the town or village from which they came, or if this is too far away to be generally known, that of their province of origin. Thus, a woodsman from Arezzo, who first came to live in Pertosa after the First World War, is inevitably called '*u Tuscann*', the Tuscan. Neighbouring villages, which furnish the greater number of outside wives, have equally provided nicknames. In this way we have '*a Stiglianese*', '*a San Maurese*', '*a Viggianese*', to name just three from the nearby villages of Stigliano, San Mauro and Viggiano. Such nicknames are a form of verbal mnemonic. They serve to call to mind the place of origin of their owners, and act as a reminder to other villagers that they should expect not only differences in material culture: dress, speech patterns and dialect, but also in many cases differences in social behaviour.

Each town and village is distinguished by the possession of a patron saint or madonna to whom an annual festival is dedicated. Whilst, on occasion, these saints may be particularly famous and act as the focus for pilgrimages from all over the province, it is felt that they have a special competence, a unique relationship, with the village over which they stand as protector. Indeed, it is not unknown for them to be dethroned if they fail to provide adequate protection. Norman Douglas, who travelled in the Salernitano shortly after the disastrous eruption of Vesuvius in 1906, reported that many

villages had changed their patron saints, since they had so conspicuously failed to save them from destruction.[4] Votive offerings are made in the first instance to one's own patron saint, and special care is taken to avoid blaspheming him. There is great competition between neighbouring villages to see which is able to give the best festival. The brilliance of the firework display, the sum of money collected during the procession and the number of visitors to the various festivals are anxiously compared, and considerable effort is made to ensure that one's own village is superior in all respects.

The annual festival is one of the few occasions on which the village demonstrates its formal unity. Indeed, the solidarity of Pertosa is more often expressed in the hostility and distrust shown towards neighbouring *paesi* and the institutions of Italian society as a whole. For most peasants and artisans the moral community is coterminous with the boundaries of the *paese*, and outsiders are treated with suspicion and reserve. Although stories are told of inter-village fights in the past, I know of no modern example. Nowadays, such enmity more readily finds expression in satirical songs and proverbs depreciating (and usually exaggerating) the customs and manners of the inhabitants of nearby villages. A song of this sort, well known in Pertosa, goes as follows:

Gorgoglione in capo ai monti,
Non c'e acqua, non c'e fonte,
L'orologio alla francese,
Accidente che brutto paese.[5]

Rivalry between villages is sharpened by the belief that they are competing for scarce political resources. Since the funds at the disposal of provincial authorities and local development agencies are limited, it is commonly held that public investment in one commune is necessarily at the expense of its neighbours. In the eyes of Pertosini the successful politician is one who makes sure that the village gets a disproportionately large share of the funds available for public works. If at the same time he can make it clear to nearby communes that they have been deprived of their part of the spoils, so much the better.

While I was living in Pertosa, I was frequently congratulated on my good fortune in having chosen so friendly a village in which to work; one of the few, I was told, with that true sense of hospitality which knew how to make strangers welcome. At San Mauro I would have encountered guile and cunning, at Stigliano malice and greed. The inhabitants of both villages were noted for their unwillingness to fulfil their rightful obligations, and could rarely be trusted. Needless to say, Pertosa enjoyed a similar reputation in neighbouring communes. Traders who come from Bari and Naples to buy

and sell in the village are both respected and feared. Their ability to drive a sharp bargain or to use the guiles of the city to cheat innocent villagers is well known. Tales of city-bred Neapolitans who take advantage of peasants form a large proportion of the stories told in Pertosa during the long winter evenings. Correspondingly, it is held to be quite legitimate to cheat an outsider should a suitable occasion present itself.

In part, the distrust of strangers is founded on reality, for a man far away from his home town can be careless of his social reputation. In dealings with *paesani* Pertosini have some assurance of fair treatment, since transactions are likely to take place in the context of a long-term relationship. In cases of theft or obvious swindling one is supported by informal sanctions such as gossip and public ridicule, which act as the arbiters of social prestige and reputation within the village. It is evident that with outsiders such sanctions are ineffective. Undoubtedly, one can invoke legal sanctions, but the law is slow, costly and unpredictable. Furthermore, from the point of view of many villagers it is unjust and corrupt. In Pertosa, as in many other Mediterranean societies, a belief in the impartial interpretation and application of legal norms forms no part of the traditional expectations of peasants.

The Village Economy

Southern Italians who are interested in rural development sometimes distinguish between *paesi di polpa* and *paesi di ossa* - between towns which have possibilities of economic development and those which do not. Undoubtedly, Pertosa belongs to the second category. It has a large population, few economic resources and very little chance of attracting government aid which might be used to redress the balance between the two. Its economic plight can best be illustrated by examining each of these elements in turn.

Until the middle of the seventeenth century, Pertosa was a small rural hamlet, surrounded by forest, with at most 1300 inhabitants. Between 1669 and 1747 its population doubled, and by 1911, despite considerable emigration, it had doubled once more. In the last fifty years this high rate of growth has been checked, and there has even been a moderate decline in population.[6] In part this decline can be attributed to a slight decrease in natural fertility rates; in part it is due to the ever-increasing volume of emigration. From 1880 to 1915 between a hundred and two hundred emigrants left the village each year, for the most part going to the United States and South America. Since 1956 even larger numbers have found work in northern Italy, or have taken jobs as seasonal migrants in Germany, France and Switzerland. Indeed, by 1964 well over one-third of the active population was

temporarily living abroad.

Unfortunately, over the same period there has been no corresponding increase in economic resources. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, three-quarters of the territory of Pertosa was covered with forests and woods, and most of the rest was permanent pasture. Animal husbandry was the primary economic activity, although most families owned or had access to small plots of land on which they cultivated wheat and vegetables. The forests constituted an important additional source of livelihood, since all adult citizens enjoyed a wide range of *usi civici* (common rights): the right to cut wood, gather acorns, pasture animals and make charcoal. As the population rose, and pressure on land grew greater, marginal lands were brought into cultivation, and pastoral farming gradually gave way to a more labour intensive arable economy. However, for peasant cultivators (although not necessarily for landlords, who were more interested in rents than productivity) these changes were not particularly advantageous. Marginal lands were inconvenient, infertile and often dangerous to work, and arable farming in general produced low yields. Furthermore, the amount of land available for conversion was strictly limited.

Shortly after the unification of Italy, the state forestry commission took charge of rather more than one-half (about 2,500 hectares) of the forests of Pertosa and established a central control station nearby. Consequently, the forest preservation laws were enforced far more stringently than in neighbouring communes, with the result that even today almost two-thirds of the lands belonging to the village consist of forest. Both ecologically and aesthetically the village has profited from conservation, but it has been a perpetual source of grievance amongst peasants. Not only were they denied access to extra land, but over the last half century the forestry commission has gradually whittled away their *usi civici*, so that nowadays the only rights which remain are those of gathering dead wood and pasturing a few animals in summer months. It is not surprising, therefore, that the forestry commission was the main object of peasant protest in the land-hungry years that followed the Second World War, and that in 1947 large numbers of Pertosini invaded and occupied its lands.

In the last twenty years two small timber firms have been set up in the village, and the building trade has enjoyed a period of relative prosperity. But neither has been able to employ more than a few local labourers, and most Pertosini who have remained in the village still derive their livelihood from agriculture. Without emigration, however, it is certain that the agricultural resources of the commune would have been insufficient to meet the needs of the population. Thus, in the immediate post- war years, when for

the most part the channels of internal and overseas migration were closed, many peasant families were only saved from starvation by outside intervention and relief. Land prices soared, and rents rose to double their pre-war value. Unemployment and underemployment were the common fate of both peasants and artisans. In 1948 one of the richest landowners in Pertosa offered work on his estates on condition that labourers should work without wages except for three daily meals. At its peak, in 1947, unemployment reached 800, when (according to the 1951 census) the total working population of the village amounted only to 1,750.

Locally compiled statistics are notoriously inaccurate in southern Italy. Within certain limits, however, table 1 is a fairly accurate guide to unemployment in the period 1956-1964.

Table 1: Unemployment in Pertosa 1956-1964[7]

Year	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964
July	572	407	377	322	167	81	87	77	76
December	560	415	378	517	443	252	215	204	195

Its chief limitations are that it includes only those persons registered at the employment exchange (*ufficio di collocamento*), and that young people seeking their first job are excluded. Nor is underemployment taken into consideration. December and July are the peak months in the annual agricultural cycle; July is the month of the harvest, a period of maximum employment, in December little can be done in the fields and unemployment is at its height. Until 1960 unemployment remained at a consistently high level; its recent decline can almost entirely be accounted for in terms of emigration.

Except for individual families, underemployment is more difficult to assess. In 1958, however, the communal authorities commissioned an inquiry into economic conditions in the village, which, amongst other things, investigated employment opportunities. According to its calculations the total agricultural resources of the commune provided an average of 117,600 days work a year. Assuming that they were divided equally among the 608 families which were listed in the 1951 census as being mainly employed in agricultural activities, each could expect to work for no more than 193 days a year.[8]

In the last few years most of Pertosa's surplus labour force, at least at the peasant level, has been absorbed by emigration, but for many artisans and professionals the problem of unemployment still remains. If traditionally peasants struggled amongst themselves for access to land, nowadays artisans and professionals compete for clients and jobs. There are far more carpenters, blacksmiths, cobblers, barbers, shopkeepers and more recently taxi-drivers than trade to provide them with a living, and for each professional post which falls vacant in the commune there are scores of qualified applicants. More than half the qualified teachers in the village are still waiting for their first paid appointment, and very few of the relatively large number of students who are now finishing their professional or university training can hope to find a speed *sistemazione* (literally a settlement, in this case a career) near home.

What then of the economic future of the village? In the first place it seems improbable that Pertosa will ever be able to provide work for all its inhabitants. There is far too little land, and what there is, is of poor quality. Nor are villagers likely to realise their hopes of attracting industry or tourism. Government plans to encourage industrialisation in the South are largely confined to coastal areas which have natural resources such as methane gas, and which can easily be connected to the national road and railway system. In the long term the development of a local tourist industry offers better prospects. So far, however, Pertosini have been unable to raise sufficient capital of their own, or to persuade the State Tourist Board to invest in hotels, restaurants and tourist facilities. Even if they succeed in the future, it is unlikely that sufficient jobs will be created to meet the needs of the population. Secondly, it is doubtful whether the present-day, largely arable economy of Pertosa can continue much longer, especially on the larger estates. Already, large landowners are having difficulty in finding peasants to work their lands, and complain bitterly about the high costs of labour. Increasingly they are converting to pasture, which they rent as grazing land to shepherds and cattle breeders. On the other hand, the future of peasant smallholdings is more problematical. Recently the government has tried to persuade peasants to consolidate and convert their scattered holdings to pasture, or else to sell them to the state for re-afforestation. Whether it is successful in this enterprise will ultimately depend on the outcome of its plans to create large-scale industrial complexes on the plains. As long as the present pattern of seasonal migration continues, peasants have little incentive to modify the existing system of cultivation. Their plots of land provide sustenance for the wives and children they leave behind in Pertosa, and offer extra income and security in old age. Only if they are found well paid, long-term, industrial work elsewhere in the South, are they likely to migrate

permanently from the village.

Family and Kinship

Italian law prescribes in great detail the mutual rights and duties of kinship and affinity, and lays great stress on the unity of the family. Both inheritance and mutual help between near kin are the subject of precise legal rules, and in the 1947 constitution, the state undertook to facilitate the development of the family (art. 31) which it described as a natural institution based on marriage (art. 29). Kinship is traced bilaterally, and recognition both in the direct and collateral line extends to the sixth degree.

Although most people in Pertosa recognise and acknowledge these provisions, there are important differences between the national-legal and the local kinship systems. In the village the legal distinction between kinship and affinity is blurred, and near affines (and, indeed, the affines of affines) are often more important than kinsmen. Moreover, the local system is far more flexible. Outside the domestic group people are fairly free to contract out of their obligations to their kin, or alternatively, especially if a distant relative is rich and influential, to reactivate a relationship which goes well beyond the limits of legal recognition.

Pertosini draw a sharp distinction between *famigliari* and *parenti* - between members of the family and other kin and affines. The conjugal family is undoubtedly the most important institution in the village. Its members have a reciprocal duty to provide friendly support, comfort and aid, and to co-operate in work and leisure activities. The family head and to a lesser extent his adult sons are expected to ensure its economic prosperity, and are jointly responsible for the sexual purity and fidelity of the women under their charge. Correspondingly, mothers and daughters must make sure that the family remains untouched by public scandal and disgrace (*che è una famiglia sulla quale non si è sentito mai niente*). In Pertosa, as in other face-to-face societies with multi-stranded relations, the successful performance of family roles is of fundamental importance, since acknowledged failure in the domestic sphere is believed to influence one's performance in other activities as well. Thus, it is widely held that an unsuccessful father, a cuckold or a wastrel, is unlikely to make a useful economic ally or a satisfactory politician, for a person who is incapable of looking after his own fundamental interests can hardly be entrusted with the cure of the affairs of others.

Although a man's primary loyalties are to his immediate family (*famigliari stretti*), the term *famigliari*, and in a somewhat diluted form the same sort of rights and duties, can be extended to a wider set of relatives. The composition of the wider family network varies greatly. It depends in part on

genealogical distance, with a slight tendency for links traced through women to be stronger than others. But it also varies with the stages of the domestic cycle, and according to the personal inclinations of its individual members. Generally speaking, however, a man's wider family network consists of his parents and grandparents, his siblings, their wives and children, and on marriage a corresponding set of relations belonging to his wife. It may also be extended to include his parent's siblings and their wives and children (his first cousins). *Famigliari* are expected to co-operate with one another, although frequently they do not. They have a mutual obligation to provide help in times of crisis, such as sickness and death, and they are invited as of right to each other's baptism, marriage and funeral services. Particularly for women, the network of *famigliari* assumes special significance, for almost all their most meaningful social relations are confined to it.

Outside the family, as social distance increases, the exchange of reciprocal services diminishes rapidly. Pertosini recognise that *parenti* have special claims on each other, but they are often sceptical about whether they will be acknowledged in particular cases. Social intimacy and regular mutual help and friendship do not extend much beyond first cousins. More distant kin may be granted favours and preferential treatment, provided that the services rendered do not clash with family interests, and that there is some assurance of a return in the future. But at this point kinship ties merge into patron-client relations.

In addition to the bonds of kinship and affinity, Pertosini seek to extend their range of effective social relations by creating ties of spiritual kinship. Although there are many ways in which the *comparizio* (godparenthood) relationship can be established, the most important take place in the context of baptism, confirmation and marriage ceremonies. Two alternative principles are used in selecting a godparent or marriage sponsor: one may choose either a social equal or a social superior (never an inferior), and this choice determines the content of the relationship. In the first case, which is by far the more common, the *compare* is likely to be a kinsman, workmate, friend or neighbour, and the relationship is a means of reinforcing and consolidating a pre-existing tie. The second belongs to the realm of patronage. In soliciting the sponsorship of a rich and influential member of the village upper classes, the peasant seeks to create a privileged relationship, and lays claim to favour, protection and preferential treatment for himself and his family.

Between social equals spiritual kinship is never merely confined to the contracting parties, but is extended to their respective families, who are expected to use a special form of address in speaking to each other. The rights and duties of a *compare* are explicitly described as being similar to

those between members of the same family, and most villagers can cite cases of *compari* who are said to be closer than brothers. Furthermore, the relationship can be handed down from one generation to the next. Indeed, in Pertosa, it is said to persist for seven generations. But this is clearly a symbolic statement about the importance of spiritual kinship, not a matter of fact, for effective recognition rarely extends for more than two generations.

Pertosini often claim that they are all mutually interrelated (*siamo tutti parenti*), and if one excludes the upper classes there is some truth in this assertion, since on the whole village endogamy is practised. Indeed, most people have far more kin, affines and *compari* than they can conveniently keep up with, and are compelled to choose which of these ties they will cultivate, and which they will allow to remain temporarily dormant. Dormant ties, however, are rarely completely forgotten, and in times of need they can be re-activated. And each Pertosini is enmeshed in an extensive network of kinship and godparenthood ties which connect him to almost every other person in the village, and which can be used and manipulated to trace linkages with powerful and influential persons in the wider Italian society.

Notes to Chapter 2.

1 Rossi-Doria (1944), reprinted in Caizzi (1962: 178).

2 For a detailed exposition of the reasons which have been put foward to explain the existence of agro-towns, see Blok (1969), Davis (1969b).

3 For a fuller discussion of the way in which Pertosini perceive the process of social mobility, see chapter 5 below.

4 Douglas (1962: 261).

5 Gorgoglione, on the top of the mountains, has neither water nor a fountain. Its clock is in the French style. What an ugly town!

6 See Appendix A for further details.

7 Source: *Ufficio di Collocamento*, Pertosa.

8 Source: *Comune di Pertosa, Piano regolatore*, 1958.