Chapter 3

The Nineteenth Century Background

The Old Feudal Order

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, southern Italy had a predominantly feudal system of government, and Pertosa, like most other communes (università) on the southern mainland, was technically a rural fief under baronial jurisdiction. At this relatively late date in European history, however, we must be careful how we handle the term feudalism, if it is to retain any comparative meaning. By the eighteenth century, it was little more than a set of residual rights, a legal fiction legitimating and perpetuating aristocratic privileges, a pale shadow of the classic Anglo-Norman system of decentralised government which had been introduced into southern Italy by the Normans and the Angevins between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries. Vassalage and knight service had disappeared, commutation taxes were in abeyance, the king's courts and a national bureaucracy supplemented, and had in part replaced, feudal justice and administration. Traditionally, feudalism had been based on reciprocity; in return for land and protection, peasants supplied labour and paid taxes to their lord; in the century which preceded its abolition in 1806, it had become a system of peasant exploitation, a means of supporting an absentee court aristocracy.

Nevertheless, feudalism had important implications both for the system of landownership and for local government. In a society in which the main economic resources were agricultural, the feudal nobility and the church were by far the largest landowners, and their economic predominance was reinforced since their holdings were virtually inalienable. Most ecclesiastical property was held in mortmain, and could be sold only if a religious order was suppressed. Feudal estates could be, and occasionally were, sold, but the legal difficulties involved in conveyancing were usually sufficient to deter any would-be purchaser. In the first place, since baronial fiefs had been originally granted as service tenures over which the king retained ultimate sovereignty, his permission had to be sought before they could be alienated. Secondly, they were subject to the laws of entail. Thirdly, and perhaps most important of all, the purchaser could never be sure what sort of property rights he was acquiring. By the end of the eighteenth century, land rights on

feudal estates were complicated, confused and usually the cause of interminable legal disputes between villagers and their overlords. In most communes different parts of the same baronial estates were held under different tenurial rights: allodial property existed side by side with feudal demesnes, which could themselves be divided into different types. In the absence of adequate documentation and exact land measurement, it was often impossible to establish the rights by which a particular piece of land was held.

A similar confusion characterised the relations between feudatories and their subjects in the field of local government. Generally speaking, they had the right to raise taxes, administer justice and appoint the main officers of the università. Almost everywhere these rights were disputed, and they differed greatly from village to village. There was no standardisation of weights and measures, and the octroi, the tax levied on goods entering and leaving the fief, varied enormously. Indeed, as the reformist Neapolitan Minister Zurlo pointed out in a memorandum of 1801, baronial exactions and the arbitrariness and uncertainties of feudal privileges not only impoverished the communes and their inhabitants, but were also a major obstacle to the economic development of the kingdom.²

In the last years of feudalism, Pertosa was one of the smallest and most insignificant of the rural fiefs in the possession of Prince Cariati, a member of the Spinelli family, one of the six richest families in Calabria. There is no evidence to suggest that the prince, who lived in Naples, ever visited Pertosa, and his estates were administered by a lawyer from a nearby town, a certain De Risi, whose family was later to become one of the most important landowners in the village.

As feudal overlord, Cariati controlled almost half the lands in the commune: two thirds he held as demesne, the rest, except for a small allodial estate of about 150 acres, were difese (enclosed lands). The distinction between demesne and difese was important, and had led to a quarrel with the università which lasted throughout the eighteenth century. Whereas difese were relatively free from usi civici, and could be cultivated as the feudal lord wished, demesne lands were subject to what were called 'promiscuous rights': in return for a small rent, citizens were entitled not only to graze animals, but to cultivate plots of arable land which they held as permanent copyholders. These rights were a source of considerable irritation to the lord, since they prevented him from exploiting his lands to the full. For most Pertosini, however, they were a major source of livelihood. Indeed, according to a royal land commissioner's report of 1817, 187 permanent copyholders held some 1300 acres of the ex-feudal demesne.

Table 2 shows the other main types of landownership in the village.

Table 2: The distribution of land in Pertosa circa 1747⁵

Type of Owner	Amount of land (in moggi) ⁶	Percentage	
Feudal lord	7,400	49	
Università	4,000	27	
Church and Monasteries	2,700	18	
Private landowners	650	5	
Waste land	150	1	
Total ⁷	14,900	100	

The next most important landowner was the università, which held about 4,000 acres of demesne. Most of its lands were forest and semi-wooded pasture, and were used for grazing animals. The demanio universale was also subject to 'promiscuous rights', and by 1817, 852 acres were divided between 298 copyholders. Indeed, the taxes paid for grazing rights (fida) and by the copyholders (terraggio) were the commune's main sources of revenue in this period. As far as most Pertosini were concerned, ecclesiastical property was of relatively minor significance. They had no rights on the lands of the many chapels and minor orders which owned property near the village, and the church demesne was on the boundaries of the commune, too far away to be conveniently worked. In 1747, the private landowners were a deceptively small category. Already, in the second half of the century, a few of them were beginning to increase the size of their holdings by buying up the property of the suppressed minor monastic orders, and by encroaching on the lands of the università.

As well as being the village's main landowner, Cariati enjoyed a wide range of fiscal, legal and administrative privileges. The first of these was undoubtedly the most remunerative, Citizens were compelled to use his mill, olive press and ovens, and were prevented from undercutting him on the market, or selling their crops before he had disposed of his produce. In addition, there were taxes on animals, roads, the *piazza* and the annual fair, and a local *octroi* was levied. The justification for these taxes was that they were supposed to meet the costs of local administration. In practice, however, offices were sold by the feudal lord to the highest bidder, who was expected to re-coup his expenses from extra taxation and the profits of justice.

By the end of the eighteenth century, there was an uneasy division of powers in local government between the feudal lord, the università, and the Regia Udienza Provinciale (the forerunner of the prefettura).8 At the head of the commune was the governor (governatore), aided by a chancellor (mastrodatti) and a constable (camerlengo), who was in charge of civil administration and justice, and who was its chief representative in the outside world. Although the governor and his assistants were appointed by the lord, they were responsible both to the provincial authorities and the locally elected council (il parlamento cittadino). Important civil and criminal offences were automatically transferred to the royal courts, and sentences involving death or mutilation had to be confirmed by the Regia Udienza Provinciale. At least once a year the governor was obliged to account for his taxes and administration before the assembled local council. The latter consisting of a mayor and four councillors, was elected annually by all adult male citizens. Its main functions were to administer the universal demesne, to fix food prices and to organise relief in times of hardship. Despite these constitutional checks and balances, the authority of the governor remained virtually unimpaired. As long as law and order was maintained, the provincial authorities did not interfere with the day-to-day running of the commune; local councillors, who in the first half of the eighteenth century were usually the governor's nominees, had little influence on his decisions and policies. Indeed, they were often unable to protect the property of the università from encroachments of the lord and his representatives.

Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was little stratification in Pertosa. Apart from a handful of professionals temporarily attached to the feudal court and a small number of artisans providing agricultural ancillary services, the vast majority of its inhabitants were peasants. There was no shortage of demesne lands, and the main limitation on the size of holdings was the amount of labour available in the household. Most families seem to have owned a few animals, which they pastured in the communal woods. Furthermore, since the local economic system was never entirely closed, peasants could find seasonal work outside the village in order to pay taxes and buy necessities such as salt and tobacco.

In the course of the century, this situation slowly changed as the result of the gradual development of a small class of prosperous landowners and professionals. The Catasto Onciario of 1743 describes at least four household heads as well-off (Magnifici), 10 and by 1821 there were about sixteen families which were clearly set apart from the rest in terms of wealth, educational qualifications and style of life. 11 The origins of this incipient class were mixed. About half of them were either ex-feudal administrators who had decided to remain in the village, or lawyers, officials and merchants

from the city who had brought land after the dissolution of the monasteries in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The rest, the so-called *civili*, were rich yeoman farmers of indigenous peasant stock who had sufficient economic resources to entrust the administration of their cattle and lands to agents, whilst they themselves lived permanently in the village. Their sons were usually educated and received professional training in Naples or in one of the provincial capitals; and some of them returned to Pertosa to set up practice as doctors, chemists, lawyers or land-surveyors.

The emergence of a rural middle class had important consequences for the balance of power in the commune. Traditionally, the peasant representatives of the *università* had found it difficult to check the abuses of the feudal lord. The communal revenues which they administered were too small to allow expensive lawsuits, and their relative lack of political contacts in the wider society made it impossible for them to protest directly to the royal court through informal channels. From the middle of the eighteenth century, however, middle class professionals, who were well able to remedy both these deficiencies, were normally elected to the local council, and consequently the *università* began increasingly to challenge feudal authority. Thus, in 1757, the citizens of Pertosa sued their lord in the royal courts for persistent fiscal abuses. Again, in 1772, the villagers, reputedly urged on by two local lawyers, rioted in protest against the election of the governor, and the provincial authorities were forced to intervene to restore order. ¹²

Although the peasantry and the new middle class were united in attacking feudal privilege, by the end of the century their interests had begun to diverge. There were frequent complaints that over-mighty (masspoderosi) citizens were over-stocking the commons, and in 1806 members of the local council were accused of failing to press home charges against the lord since they were personally interested in the outcome of the feudal commissioners' judgment. Moreover, the establishment of large farms on the demesnes by middle class families was beginning to lead to land scarcity. Nevertheless, although many of these families owned large herds of animals, the amount of land they controlled remained relatively small. In 1807, the richest of them owned only 400 acres, and some had holdings of no more than a few acres. 15

For the new rural middle class, the last years of feudalism were a period of preparation. Politically, their challenge to the feudal order in the commune had failed, but the experience that they had gained in managing and exploiting in their own interests the lands and revenues of the università was to set the pattern of local administration throughout the following century, Economically, they had been denied the control of land, but they were the

only class with sufficient savings and resources to buy the large ex-feudal and ecclesiastical estates which were to come onto the market in the first half of the nineteenth century

Land and the social classes

In 1806 the Napoleonic government in Naples abolished feudalism, and in the following decade a series of Jacobin reforms were enacted which were designed to encourage the development of private property and the commercialisation of agriculture. Baronial justice, administration and fiscal privileges were annulled, and the laws of entail and primogeniture were replaced by a system of partible inheritance. Feudal tenurial rights were revoked, and a special land tribunal and a body of royal commissioners were set up to settle outstanding disputes between feudatories and their subjects, and to advise on the most equitable way of dividing the difese and the demesnes.

Generally speaking, the commissioners' decisions followed a remarkably standard pattern. The lord was granted full property rights on the difese and on part of the demesne, the rest of which reverted to the università. The leases of the permanent copyholders were confirmed, subject only to the payment of a small annual rent to the commune. In an attempt to compensate the citizens for the loss of part of their usi civici, local authorities were authorised to grant further copyholds on the extra lands they had acquired.

In the short term, the ex-feudal nobility were the main beneficiaries of the 1806 land settlement, since they received a fully marketable set of rights in return for what were often doubtful and disputed claims. Some communes were too poor to bring proceedings against them: in others the feudal lord promised to sell his estates to middle class councillors, provided that they agreed not to challenge the evidence he presented to the commissioners. Indirectly, however, the abolition of feudal tenurial rights was of great advantage to the new middle class, who were able to purchase large amounts of land at relatively low prices. Since land was now freely disposable, many aristocratic families, who were often deeply in debt, preferred to sell their less profitable estates in order to pay off mortgages and escape ruinously high interest rates.

For peasants, these reforms were less acceptable, since the compensation they received for the loss of the *usi civici* was far from adequate. The right to graze animals and to create smallholdings on the demesne had been an indispensable part of the village economy, ensuring each household against land shortage, and providing them with the means of keeping a few animals. The advantage of this system was its flexibility. Villagers could

increase or reduce their holdings according to the fluctuating needs of their families at various stages in the domestic cycle. By contrast, the law of 1811, which sought to indemnify peasants by allotting them plots on the universal demesne, was highly inflexible. It made no provision for animal pasture, and as a 'once and for all measure' paid no heed to their future needs. Like subsequent southern Italian land reform schemes, it underestimated the political opposition of the middle classes, and failed to allow for the fact that most peasant families had insufficient capital and marketing skills to take on extra land at short notice. In many communes the council tried to delay and evade the division of the demesne, or assigned the best quotas to its own members. Although peasants were forbidden to alienate or mortgage the plots they had received for a period of ten years, many of them were so heavily in debt that they quickly passed into the hands of their creditors.

There can be little doubt that in the first half of the nineteenth century the conditions of the peasantry deteriorated. They were denied access to the demesne, and as the population rose they were increasingly obliged to turn to rich landowners in order to find work or rent extra plots of land. Under feudalism, their obligation to pay taxes and provide labour services had been onerous, but had been mitigated since the lord's agents were usually outsiders who could be easily cheated. Nineteenth century landlords, however, lived permanently in the village, and were anxious to re-coup the costs of their investment in land by the close supervision and control of their estates.

For the rural middle class this was a period of expansion and consolidation. From the seventeen-eighties, which brought the suppression of the minor monastic orders, to 1865, when the state confiscated and sold ecclesiastical property, there was a steady flow of cheap land coming onto the market. For people with capital to invest, it was an age of opportunity, and most of the present-day upper class in southern Italy can trace the origins of their family fortunes to this period. Moreover, the 1806 land settlement provided them with a further advantage, for it led to the transfer of large amounts of land to the *università*. Throughout the nineteenth century, local government was dominated by the *borghesia*. Since state control over the commune was ineffectual, they were able to use its resources for their own private gain. Almost everywhere, they usurped the demesne, and concealed their offences by destroying or falsifying the records in their charge. As Nitti remarked in the report of the parliamentary inquiry into the conditions of the southern peasantry in 1910,

'The law (of 1806) was mistaken in granting the communes custody of demesne land. It could not have found a worse trustee. '18

In Pertosa, the abolition of feudalism proved the making of the new middle class. In 1811 Prince Cariati was granted full rights to the difese, which, seven years later, he sold to three local landowners. Agreement about the division of the ex-feudal demesne took longer to achieve, since it was in the interests of both Cariati and the representatives of the commune that it should remain as pasture. In 1827, however, the land tribunal imposed a settlement: the permanent copyholders were confirmed in possession; the rest of the demesne was divided equally between the commune and the heirs of the ex-feudal lord. In 1825 the latter sold their holdings to their former administrator. Thus, in the course of little more than fifty years, a score of middle class families had replaced the feudal lord as the main economic force in the village. Together, they owned about 50% (3,200 acres) of the cultivable, non-forest land, and held a further thousand acres as permanent copyholders. In a solution of the supplication of the cultivable, non-forest land, and held a further thousand acres as permanent copyholders.

Moreover, in the first half of the nineteenth century the new middle class (by this period more accurately described as rural gentry) established their control over church and communal lands. At least one son from each family was sent into the church or took monastic orders. This strategy had a double advantage: it not only helped to maintain family estates intact, but also gave access to ecclesiastical revenues. Until 1866 the church was by far the largest institutional landowner in Pertosa. Thus, the monastery of S. Chiara held the demesne of the forest of Gallipoli which spread over three communes and covered some 15,000 acres. In addition, a dozen chapels and monasteries owned about 400 acres of vineyards and arable on the outskirts of the village. Almost without exception, the latter were administered by the younger sons of gentry families, and from 1845 to 1861 more than 3,000 acres of the forest of Gallipoli were rented as pasture by one of Pertosa's richest landowners.

The economic control which the gentry exercised over communal resources can best be illustrated by examining briefly the history of the demesne. In the period 1813-1893, there were no less than seven public inquiries into the state of the universal demesne in Pertosa. These inquiries were usually prompted by peasant complaints to the prefect that leading citizens were usurping and enclosing public property; on at least five occasions, their accusations were confirmed by the subsequent findings of the provincial land commissioners. For example, in 1862 the commissioner reported that the mayor had usurped 115 acres of demesne lands, and that all but two of the other councillors were guilty of similar offences. Indeed, by the end of the century the amount of land held by the permanent copyholders had more than doubled, and most of this increase was due to illegal occupation. To a greater or lesser extent all the copyholders were guilty of

illegally extending their holdings, and for land-hungry peasants the temptation to cut trees and to plough a few extra strips of land each year must have been very great. By far the greatest offenders, however, were the gentry who were able to conceal their encroachments by falsifying communal land records or bribing the provincial commissioners. Even if they were caught, for reasons I discuss in my next section, penalties were usually light. At worst, they were obliged to pay arrears of rent on the lands they had usurped.²⁷

Throughout the nineteenth century peasants protested, rioted and appealed to the prefect to expropriate demesne lands which had been illegally occupied, and to distribute them amongst the poor. But although the law was on their side, ²⁸ their pleas were of little avail. The peasants of Pertosa were exceptionally unfortunate in that it was one of the few communes in Basilicata in which no distribution took place. ²⁹ At the beginning of the century, the communal authorities argued quite falsely that there was no land to allot, since all the demesne was covered with forests: at the end, their argument had come to have a certain validity, for those parts of the demesne which were suitable for cultivation had already been usurped.

By 1861 the gentry owned or controlled more than three-quarters of the economic resources of Pertosa, and three families owned large estates in nearby communes. Most of them still lived permanently in the village. By close surveillance of their estates, and by the judicious purchase of extra land, they had little difficulty in providing adequately for their children, despite the succession laws of the code Napoleon which compelled them to divide most of their property equally between all their heirs. By contrast, the peasants were far less favourably placed. They had received no compensation for the loss of common rights, and few had sufficient resources to buy land. Most of them still owned some land, but as the population rose their holdings were increasingly subject to fragmentation. Indeed, between 1817 and 1862 the average size of peasant holdings on the ex-feudal demesne decreased by almost one-half. As never before, they had become dependent on the gentry for work, land and livelihood.

After 1865, the supply of cheap properties coming onto the market declined, and the gentry, like the peasants before them, were faced with a problem of land shortage. To judge from the size of their families, birth control was uncommon, and they were consequently threatened with the possibility that the social position and the estates which they had so carefully accumulated during the first half of the century would be fragmented and scattered amongst their heirs. Furthermore, after the state had confiscated ecclesiastical property, the custom of sending younger sons into the church

became far less profitable, and increasing government control over forest land deprived them of a valuable source of income. Nevertheless, the gentry were able to defend their weakening economic position in a number of ways. First, the abolition of primogeniture and the introduction of laws of partible inheritance had relatively little effect on a tradition which encouraged younger sons not to marry, and there was still a tendency for their portion of an inheritance to return at death so that the family holding should not be dispersed. Secondly, they were able to maintain or even increase their economic returns by converting their estates from pasture to arable and renting plots to land-hungry peasants. Thirdly, their mastery of local administration and monopoly of educational and professional qualifications could be turned to good account in a period in which the state was beginning to channel resources into the commune and to recruit a local bureaucracy.

The first of these expedients had the greatest influence on class formation in Pertosa. Generally speaking, only the eldest son and one or two daughters were expected to marry and produce heirs. On marriage, daughters were given a dowry of jewelry and money; in return, their husbands were obliged to sign a contract in which they acknowledged that the portion they had received extinguished any future rights to the family estates. At the death of the family head, the eldest son claimed the disponibile, 31 and shared the rest with his brothers and unmarried sisters. The latter were supposed to enjoy only usufructary rights on the property which they had inherited, and ultimately it was to return to the main line. In practice, this pattern of inheritance was difficult to enforce. Younger sons sometimes quarreled with the family head and insisted on their legal rights. More often they took peasant concubines, and ended by legitimating one or more of the offspring of the union. In most cases upper class fathers accepted some obligations towards children whom they were not prepared to recognise legally. Daughters were provided with a dowry and married to artisans; sons were apprenticed to a trade or given capital to start a business. Indeed, almost one-third of present-day artisans (and a slightly higher percentage of their wives) can trace descent from nineteenth century gentry families.

In the last quarter of the century, emigration began to redress the balance between the peasants and the gentry. The first Pertosini to go to the United States left the village in about 1873. Their success quickly attracted many others, and by 1900 there were very few peasant families without at least one member overseas. The aims of these early emigrants were fairly straightforward: for the most part they sought to earn enough money to buy land or provide their daughters with a dowry house. The rapid rise in the amount of money deposited in post office savings accounts in the early years of the new century, ³² and the increased volume of land sales in the period

1890-1920, is ample testimony of their success. By 1905 the gentry were already complaining of the rising costs of land and the difficulty of finding labour in peak seasons.³³ By providing peasants with an alternative means of livelihood, and a chance of achieving economic independence, emigration had come to constitute one of the main limitations on the power and economic dominance of the village upper class.

Local Politics

One of the most important reforms of the French interregnum was the introduction of representative local government and the setting up of a territorial bureaucracy modelled on the French prefectorial system. After the restoration of the Bourbons, this system was confirmed, with minor modifications, by a law of 1816, which laid down the sphere of competence of the local council (il decurianato), and the terms under which it was to be elected. In comparison with the parlamento cittadino, its feudal predecessor, the council had some degree of autonomy, since it was responsible only to the Intendant, the king's delegate in the province; it also had greater resources at its disposal, and a wider set of duties to perform. Nevertheless, as a recent Italian historian has remarked, the decurianato can be more properly seen as part of the bureaucratic apparatus of the Bourbon state than as a truly representative body.³⁴ The mayor was appointed by the king, and even elected councillors had to seek government approval before they could take up office. Furthermore, the franchise which was based on educational and property qualifications was very narrow: only landowners, professionals and a few of the more prosperous artisans and peasants had the right to vote or were eligible to sit on the council. Indeed, after the uprisings of 1820 and 1848 had led to the political disenfranchisement of many gentry families, the government was compelled to lower electoral qualifications, since in many small communes there were hardly enough eligible candidates to fill vacant posts.35

Table 3 shows the social composition of the body of electors in Pertosa. Although landowners and professionals never monopolised voting rights, they came close to enjoying a monopoly of office in the commune. They were the only class with literacy qualifications, and as such they were assured of a regular built-in majority. In fact, so far as I can tell from the pre-1861 communal records, artisans and peasants never held more than one-quarter of the seats on the council, and the mayor and aldermen (primi cletti) were always members of gentry families.

Table 3: List of Electors in Pertosa 1821-183236

	Landowners (Civili)	Professionals	Shopkeepers	Artisans	Others ³⁷	Total
1821	14	12	2	2	22	52
1829	18	14	1	4	25	62
1832	21	17	1	32	59	130

At the formal constitutional level, the unification of Italy brought very few changes to the organisation of local government, since the Piedmontese bureaucracy, like its Bourbon predecessor, was based on the Napoleonic code. Indeed, until the franchise was extended in 1882, there were fewer voters in Pertosa than there had been before unification, and very much the same sort of people were elected to the council.

But the establishment of a constitutional monarchy completely altered the balance of power between the state and the local political elite. In the first half of the nineteenth century the gentry had had little influence on either national or provincial decision making: the elected provincial assemblics which had been established by the constitution were rarely called; the two experiments in parliamentary government which the Bourbons had reluctantly conceded in 1820 and 1848 were short-lived and unsuccessful. By contrast, after 1861 the government was obliged to court southern voters in order to maintain a stable majority in parliament.

Until the end of the First World War, the Liberal party dominated Italian politics and public life. In parliament the main struggles were not between the Liberals and other parties, but between the various Liberal factions from which the government had to produce its majority. Indeed, in the modern sense of the term, it is doubtful whether the Liberals can be called a party: they had no permanent organization in the constituencies and no shared political programmes and ideologies, nor means of disseminating them; there were neither central political funds nor a national newspaper. Government majorities and voting strength in the constituencies were built up by the judicious use of state patronage. As the government's representative in the province, the prefect played a key role in this process. In addition to his administrative and regulatory functions, he was expected to act as electoral agent for government candidates. He helped them to gather votes by promising contracts, rewards and offices to local electors and their followers, by condoning violence and bribery at the hustings, and by turning a blind eye to the

abuses of power of local magnates in the communes.

Under Depretis and Giolitti, ³⁸ the South came to play a vital role in maintaining and perpetuating the national patronage system, or the system of transformismo as it was commonly called. In comparison with northern Italy, it had relatively few voters, and state resources could be more easily used to bind them to the government party. Indeed, by the end of the century, two hundred 'ministerial' deputies from the South, placemen who could be relied upon to vote for whatever government was in office, formed the core from which Giolitti built up his parliamentary majorities. ³⁹ In return for faithful service in Rome, they sought and obtained favours, services and protection for their supporters and clients in the provinces. To quote Max Weber's memorable phrase, they lived off politics not for politics. ⁴⁰

Factionalism in parliament was closely mirrored at the local level, where the political elite quarreled amongst themselves over the control of jobs, privileges and benefits in the gift of the commune. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the resources and field of action of the commune greatly increased. After the confiscation of ecclesiastical property and the opere pie (the church charity boards) in 1865, it became responsible for the administration of charity relief funds; as the result of increasing state investment in public works, it was charged with improving roads, schools and public services, and had the right to grant contracts and appoint local officials and schoolteachers. In addition it retained control over demesne lands and the collection and distribution of local taxes. In a period in which the economic conditions of the gentry were deteriorating, these resources provided a valuable additional source of income. Younger sons could be found jobs as schoolteachers or communal employees, and most members of upper class households were able to avoid paying taxes and to encroach on the commons.

But the resources at the disposal of the commune were far too slight to meet demands on them. And the structure of local politics came to reflect the rivalries and hostilities of gentry families. Political success lay in gaining control of the resources and perquisites of office; the price of failure was exclusion from the distribution of the spoils, and the risk of being called to account for past abuses by one's rivals. 41

In the period between 1880 and the First World War, politics in Pertosa was dominated by two contending factions, struggling for mastery in the commune, and seeking to exclude their opponents from the fruits of office. Both were led by prosperous landowners who were also village lawyers, and their quarrel seems to have originated in professional rivalry. Although the two main contestants remained constant in their hostility for more than thirty

years, the support they received from allies and clients appears to have fluctuated greatly. Both enjoyed spells of office, but frequently quarreled with their supporters over the division of the spoils, and peripheral members of both factions could easily be persuaded to change sides by the promise of rewards from their opponents.

Although landowners and professionals continued to maintain their supremacy in the commune (for example, in 1911 they held eleven out of twenty seats on the council), as a result of extensions of the franchise in 1882 and 1892, they came to constitute only a small percentage of the electorate. Between 1861 and 1882 the number of voters went up from 90 to 212, and by 1895 it had risen to 354. Most of the new voters were artisans and relatively prosperous peasant household heads.

The most important consequence of the growth of the electorate was that the gentry were obliged to seek votes among the lower social orders. In part they achieved this by cajolery, bribery and sometimes force on polling day, in part they sought to build up a permanent or semi-permanent network of supporters by the use of personal and communal patronage. Peasants and artisans could be rewarded with minor salaried posts in the commune which were unsuitable for members of the gentry, or could be granted contracts and land on favourable terms. Furthermore, the practice whereby younger sons took peasant or artisan concubines turned out to have an unexpected political pay-off. The children of such unions were usually sufficiently prosperous to have the vote, and it was clearly to their advantage to consolidate ties with the legitimate branch of the family by offering electoral support. Indeed, in 1911 at least four of the artisan members of the council were the illegitimate descendants of gentry families, and one of the peasant councillors was the fiduciario and godchild of the deputy mayor.

Throughout the nineteenth century, political opposition in Pertosa was rarely, if ever, expressed in terms of conflicting political ideologies. The Socialist party, which Salvemini hoped would extend throughout the South to champion the interests of the poor, was established in the village only after the First World War. Peasant protests were confined to periodic outbursts of rioting and rick-burning and, more occasionally, brigandage.

In so far as a party label can be attached to the political activities of the upper class, they seem consistently to have supported the Liberals. There were no party offices or political associations in the village, and factional rivalry had few ideological overtones. In general elections most voters supported the government candidate. Thus, in 1900 the sub-prefect calculated that he could count on about 182 out of 230 possible votes, and complained that this figure was unusually low.⁴³ Although a few landowners and their

clients might threaten to vote for the opposition candidate, (probably another Liberal, but without government backing) they could normally be persuaded to change their allegiance by promises of patronage or recriminations. During the 1900 election, for example, the prefect instructed the provincial director of education to admonish three elementary schoolmasters who seemed likely to vote against the government. They were to be told that their future careers depended on the support of their political superiors. At all social levels voting behaviour followed patronage interests. In the words of the parliamentary commissioner of 1910,

'Properly speaking, the voters (of Pertosa) have neither political nor administrative objectives. The way they vote is determined by ties of clientage (aderenze personali) and by family obligations.'45

Although the nineteenth century patronage system was probably unavoidable, there can be little doubt that in economic terms it was both wasteful and inefficient. Successive Liberal governments paid a high price for political stability, and there was much truth in Salvemini's assertion that the southern ruling class was the main obstacle to the economic progress of the *Mezzogiorno*. State resources which were intended to improve conditions in the South were appropriated by the local political elite; communal funds were used as a form of outdoor charity relief for improvident members of the upper class.

On the eve of the First World War, many communes were on the verge of bankruptcy. Thus, in 1911 the prefect was obliged to send a commissioner to Pertosa to try and save it from insolvency. His report was a catalogue of the financial abuses, malpractices and mismanagement of the local administrators: the accounts were three years out of data, the rich were virtually exempt from taxation, most of the communal demesnes had been usurped, funds for improving roads and schools, and for paying for a drainage scheme and street lighting had been misappropriated. The commissioner attempted to remedy the grosser abuses, and to put communal finances on a sounder footing. But no attempt was made to discover or to punish the culprits, thanks to the protection which they enjoyed as clients in the national patronage system. 46

An Example: The Carli-Bruni Affair

One of the problems of trying to add an historical dimension to a conventional anthropological field study is the difficulty of finding systematic and detailed information comparable to that which can be gathered by modern field-work techniques. Historians who make use of local sources choose towns and villages which are known to have fully documented

archives, and, generally speaking, they are not interested in re-creating a systematic historical account of one particular place, but in using local materials to illustrate and appraise generalisations about the wider society. In comparison with other towns in southern Italy, Pertosa is not especially wellfurnished with archive material: the communal records have been partially destroyed on at least two occasions, and there is reason to believe that some of them were systematically falsified in the last century; for some periods, for example under Fascism, there is virtually no documentary information available. In the three preceding sections of this chapter, my analysis of the nineteenth century history of Pertosa has been based on a mixture of national and local sources. I am well aware that my interpretation of them has been influenced and coloured by historical accounts of other areas of southern Italy. Although methodically this procedure is dubious, there is no way of avoiding it. At best, as a corrective, I can offer a detailed case study, confined exclusively to Pertosa, which illustrates many of the issues I have treated earlier in the chapter.

The Carli-Bruni affair, like most quarrels in Pertosa, began as a dispute over the ownership of land. AT In 1887 Leopoldo Bruni, a fairly prosperous landowner, accused Domenico Carli and his sons of illegally grazing animals on one of his properties in the contrada of Orta. The latter replied that the land in question was communal demesne on which they had common rights, including the right to pasture animals, and they refused to be evicted. On the insistence of Bruni, who as deputy mayor had some authority over the police, Carli was arrested, and a series of trials, law-suits and appeals began which were to last for more than three years. Finally, in 1890 the Court of Appeal in Potenza decided in Carli's favour. Costs were awarded against his adversary, and the court also made a provisional judgment that Orta was demesne land and recommended a full inquiry into the state of the universal demesne in Pertosa.

In the course of the various law-suits, Bruni put forward two quite different claims to the ownership of Orta. Initially, he argued that although it had originally belonged to the commune, the council had granted him a permanent leasehold in 1880. After the court had rejected this plea, he claimed that most of the *contrada* had belonged to his mother's father, Salvatore Conte. He had inherited part of it from his mother, the rest he had bought from his cousins and had inherited from his own father.

In order to assess these claims, the court was obliged to examine the land records for Orta and for the Bruni and Conte families. Originally, Orta and the adjoining *contrada* of Candela (together, about 150 acres) had been part of the feudal demesne. However, whilst Candela, which was nearer to

the village, was almost entirely divided into arable smallholdings, Orta had few permanent copyholders, and was used as pasture by the villagers as a whole. In 1835 both of these *contradas* had passed into the hands of the commune as part of its share of the feudal land settlement. Officially, no new leaseholds had been granted on either of them.

The Bruni family, like many of the local gentry, were fairly recent immigrants to the village. Leopoldo's father, Don Francesco Nicola, had arrived in Pertosa in about 1800 with a license to sell salt and tobacco. By 1814 he owned thirty acres of arable land and had rights on a further thirteen acres of demesne, including two acres at Candela. In 1822 he married the daughter of Salvatore Conte, a middling landowner, and received three acres on the borders of Candela and Orta as part of his wife's dowry. In comparison with other gentry families, neither were particularly well-off. Neither owned more than a hundred acres of land at any time during the nineteenth century, and both were dependent on income from other sources.

Don Francesco Bruni had four children, three sons and a daughter. His first son died in adolescence, the second, Leopoldo, held a job as a forestry inspector in Calabria until well after his father's death in 1863. The third son became a priest and was in charge of a minor religious order in Pertosa, whose lands he bought after the sale of ecclesiastical property in 1865. Teresa Bruni remained unmarried, living first with her father, and then looking after her youngest brother.

In about 1872 Leopoldo Bruni retired and returned to Pertosa, where he soon began to take an active interest in politics. By 1878 he was a prominent member of the Fava faction and an alderman in the 1878-1882 administration. Again, in the period 1887-1891 he served as deputy mayor in a council headed by Giulio Fava, one of the richest landowners in the village.

As a leading politician, Bruni was in a strong position to press his claims to the unoccupied forty acres of grazing land in the *contrada* of Orta. The estates at Candela which he had inherited from his parents surrounded about half the *contrada*, and he was able to deny the villagers direct access to it by enclosing his lands and the right of way which passed through. Furthermore, about this time he appears to have falsified the *catasto* by altering the three acres he inherited from his mother to eight. In 1880 one of his neighbours on the other side of Orta emigrated, and his four acre holding reverted to the commune. Bruni not only managed to persuade his fellow councillors to assign him this land at a very low rent, but also in preparing the deed of conveyance failed to mention the size of the holding. Consequently, he claimed the whole forty acres of Orta as his own, and, as many peasants testified, between 1880 and 1887 he managed to prevent villagers

from using their grazing rights.

At the first trial in 1887 the court rejected Bruni's claim that he had received Orta in leasehold from the commune. Undeterred he appealed on quite different grounds. He argued that the boundaries between Orta and Candela were incorrectly recorded in the catasto, and maintained that the land from which he had evicted Carli and other villagers was part of the Candela estates he had inherited from his parents. Ultimately, this argument was also rejected, but, as his opponents pointed out, he had managed to confuse the issue to the point at which it became necessary to make a fresh survey of the communal demesne before he could be legally evicted.

The refusal of Carli and his sons to refrain from pasturing their animals at Candela was one of the most interesting aspects of the Carli-Bruni affair. Domenico Carli was a prosperous peasant farmer who owned a small herd of animals and about six acres of land at Candela. At least one of his sons had some formal education and was twice a member of the council between 1900 and 1911. More important, however, Carli appears to have been closely attached to Enrico Grassi, a lawyer and landowner, and one of the major opponents of the Fava faction. There is some evidence to suggest that Grassi had baptised one of the Carli children, and they probably worked his lands. 48 Francesco Carli was councillor in the Grassi administration, and the latter acted as legal advisor, advocate and sponsor during the quarrel with Bruni, Indeed, in 1887 Bruni accused Grassi of acting out of political pique, and brought a parallel action against him for having encouraged Carli to trespass on his lands. Certainly, to judge from the many peasant dispositions which were made at the trial, the Carlis seem to have been the only peasants who were prepared to defy Bruni, and the fact that they could count on the support of an upper class patron probably explains their intrepidity.

Although Bruni lost both the trial and his appeal, the citizens of Pertosa were equally unsuccessful in recovering their grazing rights at Orta. In 1890 the prefect ordered an inquiry into the universal demesne, and instructed the council to confiscate Bruni's holding. His orders, however, were disobeyed. The council, of which Bruni was a prominent member, replied that they were unable to confiscate his land, since they had lost the documents which proved their legal title to it. The proposed inquiry was also shelved. Leopoldo Bruni died in 1892. His heirs, however, seem to have enjoyed uncontested possession, for a report on the state of the demesne in 1895 shows them holding forty acres in the *contrada* of Orta. 49

The reasons for which Bruni escaped the consequences of his clearly illegal actions are less adequately documented. His enemies, in particular Grassi, claimed that he had received political protection from outside the

village. They suggested that he and Giulio Fava not only conspired to destroy incriminating evidence, but also managed to invoke the help of the local deputy to silence and neutralise the prefect. Although it is difficult to validate these accusations, there is one small piece of confirmatory evidence. In the confidential archives of the prefecture for 1890, there is a note from the deputy of Tricarico to the prefect recommending Leopoldo Bruni as an honest citizen and an able administrator. 50

The Carli-Bruni case was exceptional only in so far as it was extremely well documented. But it is also interesting because it exemplifies many of the historical processes which I described earlier in the chapter. In the first place, it provides an example of the way in which the gentry were able to use their mastery of the commune to supplement and strengthen their economic position at the expense of both communal resources and citizens' rights. In his role as councillor and deputy mayor, Bruni not only usurped land and destroyed and falsified local records, but was able to intimidate those who contested his claims. Since the *catasto* was not based on exact land measurement, the courts found it difficult to decide on boundary disputes and were slow to dispossess sitting tenants. Threats of police action, high legal costs and delays and the need to attend courts outside the village deterred the would-be peasant litigant and favoured the upper class for whom possession was truly nine points of the law.

Secondly, and more tentatively, this case shows the difficulties which the provincial authorities encountered in checking abuses in the communes. The *meridionalista*, Antonio De Vito De Marco, once remarked that Giolitti had sold the prefect and bought the deputy. I and his aphorism neatly summarises the way in which Bruni managed to avoid prosecution. The administrative duties of the prefect clashed with his role as electoral agent; by playing off the one against the other, and by invoking the protection of the local deputy, influential electors had plenty of room for manoeuvre in manipulating the resources of the commune to their own ends.

But the Carli-Bruni affair also illustrates some of the limitations on the power of the local political elite. Many anthropologists have pointed out that patronage, whatever its disadvantages, provides a means whereby those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy can attempt to influence decisions which touch their welfare and livelihood;⁵² and the sponsorship which Carli received from Grassi throughout the trial can certainly be interpreted in this light. The political implications of horizontal relations between patron and patron and client and client have received far less attention, but are equally important in explaining Grassi's mode of action. At least in part, Bruni was justified in claiming that his adversary was interested in neither

justice nor the rights of defenceless peasants, but was using the Carli affair as a stick with which to beat the opposing faction. A law-suit and a public inquiry were suitable occasions for discrediting his enemies, and his generous sponsorship of Carli might serve to attract further clients.

Competition between members of the local political elite came to constitute one of the major checks on the abuse of power. It enabled national and provincial authorities to operate a policy of divide and rule, for they could threaten to support an opposing faction, if the demands or abuses of one set of clients became too great. To a very limited extent, prosperous peasants and artisans could also pay off their patrons against each other. But this strategy was exceptional in the nineteenth century. Most peasants were still excluded from patron-client networks, for until the introduction of universal male suffrage in 1911 they had very little to offer to the village political elite.

Summary and Prologue

Throughout the nineteenth century, the ownership of land was closely associated with high status, privilege and power. For the rich it was by far the safest investment: for the poor a mark of respectability and credit worthiness. It was the passport to political office and a professional career, and the main source of livelihood for the vast majority of the population. The ownership of sufficient land to exempt a man from the necessity to earn a living with his hands was the criterion which distinguished the gentleman from the peasant, the signore from the cafone. It was, however, the prerogative of the very few.

Although the Jacobin feudal land settlement had sought to create a class of independent peasant proprietors, it had led to a concentration of property in the hands of a new and more rapacious local gentry, and, as many of the early meridionalisti argued, the emergence of a new and more unpleasant form of feudalism. Peasants were denied their usi civici and cut off from access to the demesne. As demographic pressure on land increased, they were forced into a relationship of dependency which they had never experienced under the traditional feudal system. By the middle of the century, there were few peasant households which had sufficient land to meet their needs; at some stage of the domestic cycle, almost everyone was compelled to seek work or rent extra plots from large landowners.

But the power and influence of the gentry were not only derived from their control of land. As masters of the commune they controlled other valuable resources, and they were also the main intermediaries between village and state. Central government decisions affecting the village were interpreted and administered by local upper class officials, usually in their own interests. The distribution of national and communal resources was channelled through their hands. Peasants and artisans who had dealings with the state bureaucracy - for example, in seeking to obtain a passport or claiming exemption from military service - were obliged to seek their aid. Although in the second half of the nineteenth century the state had, for the first time, the technical capacity to check up on its subordinates in the communes, ironically enough, it was obliged to forego this advantage in the interests of electoral politics.

In this period, however, the brokerage functions of the village elite were far less important than they were to become in the following century. Although after 1861 there was a quickening of village-state relations, most peasants and artisans had very little contact with provincial and national authorities. The scope for bureaucratic intermediaries was necessarily limited. In Pertosa, this is clearly reflected in the structure of patron-client relations. Although the gentry were clients in the national patronage system, and in turn attempted to build up a following of supporters amongst artisans and peasants, patron-client networks were largely confined to the body of electors. The favours, resources and protection which the gentry enjoyed as intermediaries between village and state were largely used to further the economic interests of their own immediate families. They had little reason to redistribute these benefits amongst the population as a whole, since most peasants could offer nothing in return. Peasants and artisan voters were, of course, worth cultivating, and, indeed, many of them were allied to gentry families through ties of illegitimate or spiritual kinship. But they were few in numbers, and communal and personal patronage were usually sufficient to 'buy' their support.

Fascism is usually interpreted as a period of stagnation in the South, a period in which, except for spectacular gestures, its social problems were ignored and the gap between North and South grew wider. There can be little doubt that by prohibiting emigration and encouraging grain production the Fascist regime helped to perpetuate the economic stranglehold of the southern gentry. Furthermore, the establishment of the corporate state and the abolition of elections deprived the peasants of the potential advantages of universal suffrage which they had been granted in 1911.

But in the political sphere Fascism brought a number of important changes. For the first time, party organisations and associations were established in southern communes. Since the government was no longer dependent on the clientele of local notables to maintain a majority in parliament, it was better able to control their political activities in the communes. In part,

and very slowly, the political influence of the gentry gave way to that of professional politicians.

All these tendencies can be found in Pertosa in the inter-war period. Most villagers were obliged to hold a party card, and both children and adults were enrolled into Fascist political associations. Members of at least two landless families achieved political success and prestige through holding permanent secretaryships in local branches of the Fascist party. Landownership was no longer a necessary prerequisite for a political career. Yet, although these changes were a portent for the development of politics in the post-war era, their immediate effects were limited. Landowning interests continued to dominate the council and the Fascist party organisation; factionalism and hostility between gentry families was expressed in rivalry between the various local associations of the Fascist movement. The ideological content of politics was still very low.

Notes to Chapter 3

- 1 The amount of land controlled by the church and the nobility has been a matter of great controversy amongst Italian historians. In his classic study on feudalism (1909) Trifone argued that eleven-twelfths of the lands on the southern mainland were held by the church and the nobility. Recent local studies, particularly on the Catasto Onciario, have suggested that this percentage is far too high. For a fuller discussion of this issue see Villani (1962: 24-44).
- 2 Quoted in Cestaro (1963: 15-6).
- 3 This quarrel had two main aspects. Firstly Cariati claimed that part of the demesne were *difese*. Secondly, he argued that the right of the citizens to create holdings on the demesne required his prior consent.
- 4 ASP, Atti Demaniali, fasc. 2 bis, fogli 21-2.
- 5 Source: Carta topografica di Pertosa c.1747, ASP,. Atti Demaniali, fasc.6., foglio 14.
- 6 A moggio or a tomolo as it was later called is equal to 0.377 hectares, or approximately an acre.
- 7 The difference between this figure and the present-day size of the territory of Pertosa can in part be explained by inexact land measurement, in part by boundary adjustments. The amount of land 'owned' by the feudal lord and the università is probably somewhat exaggerated.
- 8 For a full description of local government in Basilicata in this period, see Pedio (1940).

- 9 Source: Catasto Onciario, 1743, ASN No. 5343 and 5335. Unfortunately the register for Pertosa had been damaged, and it was therefore impossible to make a precise estimate of the distribution of property in this period.
- 10 See footnote 9.
- 11 ASP, Fondo Ammininistazioni Communali Fasc. 17, Lista degli eleggibili (electoral register), 1821.
- 12 ASP, Antiche Giurisdizioni, fasc. 25.
- 13 ASP, Atti Demaniali, fasc. 1, fog. 21.
- 14 In 1821 about a dozen families held some 750 acres of ex-feudal demesne (about 60%). Holdings on the communal demesne were much smaller. Nevertheless, seven middle class families held almost one-quarter of the lands let on permanent copyholds. ASP, Atti Demaniali, fasc. 2, bis, fog., 21-25.
- 15 ASM, Vecchio Catasto Provvisorio, 1807.
- 16 See for example Murat's remark that the abolition of feudalism had been of greatest profit to the ex-feudal lords (Cestaro 1963: 38).
- 17 Trifone (1909: 186).
- 18 Nitti (1910, Vol.V, Tome IV: Appendix XX).
- 19 In this period, both Cariati and several middle class councillors used the demesne to pasture large herds of animals. They feared that if a settlement was reached the commissioners would insist on their allotting part of these lands to peasants.
- 20 ASP, Atti Demaniali, Fasc. 7.
- 21 This calculation, which is only approximate, is based in part on the vecchio catasto, in part on the list of copyholders of 1817.
- 22 Archivio Vescovile di Tricarico, uncatalogued.
- 23 ASM, Atti Notarili, Campanelli, n. 1230, f.6.
- 24 AC, Report of the land commissioner (agente demaniale) Vitale Vincenzo, 1894, p. 1.
- 25 ASP, Atti Demaniali, fasc. 26, pp. 21-34.
- 26 AC, Report of the land commissioner Vitale Vincenzo, p. 53.
- 27 This was a very light punishment. The rents paid for demesne land (half a tornolo of grain for each acre sown) were only half the traditional rent paid in Pertosa.
- 28 According to a law of 1841, landlords were in theory obliged to compensate villagers by giving them at least one-fifth of any ex-feudal

demesne.

- 29 Nitti (1910, Vol.V, Tome IV: 75). Altogether there were seven communes in the province in which there was no land distribution.
- 30 In 1817 the average size of holdings was 3.17 acres, while in 1862 it was 1.7 acres. Sources: ASP, Atti Demaniali, fasc.2. bis, f. 21-2 and fasc. 19, f.47-57.
- 31 The disponibile is the portion of an estate (usually one-third) which a person can leave to whomsoever he pleases.
- 32 Between 1900 and 1906 the amount of money deposited in the post office in Pertosa tripled (Nitti 1910, Vol.V, Tome IV: Appendix XV).
- 33 AC Deliberazione Comunale, 6.1.1905.
- 34 Cestaro (1963: 53).
- 35 Pedio, (1961a: 64-5).
- 36 Source: ASP, Fondo Amministrazioni Comunali, n.121, fasc. 17, 24, and 27.
- 37 The fairly large 'other' category probably consisted of prosperous peasants and mulateers (persons with a tax assessment of more than ten ducats a year) although the *liste degli eleggibili* do not give their occupation. Their chances of being elected to the commune were, however, slight, since by law at least two-thirds of the councillors had to be literate. In fact, in 1832, 82 out of 120 voters were illiterate.
- 38 Depretis was Prime Minister three times between 1876 and 1887. Giolitti led the government on five separate occasions in the period 1892-1921
- 39 Seton-Watson (1967: 247).
- 40 Weber (1921: 84).
- 41 The classic account of the structure of local politics in this period is to be found in the writings of Salvemini. See for example his article of 1911 'La piccola borghesia intellettuale nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia' (reprinted in Salvemini 1963: 481-92).
- 42 ASP, Fondo Regia Prefettura Gabinetto, fasc. 6, unnumbered.
- 43 ASP Fondo Regia Prefettura Gabinetto, Fasc. 6, unnumbered. The electorate was smaller for national than it was for local elections.
- 44 ASP Fondo Regia Prefettura Gabinetto, Fasc. 6, unnumbered.
- 45 Nitti (1910: 192).
- 46 ASP Fondo Regia Prefettura Gabinetto, fasc. 8, unnumbered.

- 47 Except where otherwise stated, this section is based on two main sources: ASP, Atti Demaniali, fasc. 27, which includes a transcript of the 1887 trial, and a pamphlet produced by an historian from Pertosa (Loscalzo 1890).
- 48 This information was supplied rather tentatively by one of Carli's grandchildren.
- 49 AC Report of the land commissioner Vitale Vincenzo, 1895.
- 50 ASP Fondo Regia Prefettura Gabinetto, fasc. 7, unnumbered.
- 51 Quoted in Sacco (1965: 8).
- 52 See, for example, Boissevain (1966: 29).