

## Chapter 5

### Social Class and Social Mobility

#### The Social Classes

Until the early nineteen-fifties it was possible to discern a fairly straightforward three class system of stratification in Pertosa. The social classes: the gentry, artisans and peasants corresponded quite neatly to the main occupational categories. They could be distinguished in terms of income, patterns of consumption, housing, dress, speech and recreational associations, and with very few exceptions class endogamy was practised.

At the top of the social hierarchy were some twenty families of rural gentry, the *signori* or *galantuomini* as they were normally called. Their power and position was based in part on their control of land, in part on their monopoly of scarce educational skills which enabled them to act as brokers between village and state. They were the only class that received secondary education, and the local professions: doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers and the more important local government officials were recruited from their ranks. In politics, they normally provided the mayor and the *assessori* (aldermen) and filled the secretaryships of the main political parties. About three-quarters of the gentry could trace the origins of their family fortunes to the beginning of the nineteenth century; the rest had achieved their position just before the First World War.

Next in the socio-economic hierarchy came the artisans (*mastri*) and a few shopkeepers, together about a hundred and twenty families. In terms of income and style of life they were far nearer to the peasantry than the gentry, and like the more prosperous peasants they usually owned enough land to meet most of their subsistence requirements. Almost invariably, they had some educational qualifications, and even their wives were literate. Some artisans and shopkeepers were also patrons in their own right, but usually on a small scale. Peasants depended on them for credit and small political favours, and, because of their ties of illegitimate kinship with gentry families, they sometimes acted as intermediaries between peasants and the village upper class. Many artisans were also active in local politics, and they were fairly frequent members of the council. The origins of this class were

somewhat mixed. A few came from families which had practised the same trade for more than a century, but most were either descendants of the illegitimate offspring of nineteenth century gentry families or the children of early emigrants who had been apprenticed to a trade. In this period, the distinction between artisans and shopkeepers was relatively unimportant, since both came from much the same sort of families and had similar incomes and styles of life.

Last of all came the peasants (*contadini* or sometimes *cafoni*)<sup>1</sup> who constituted almost 90% of the population. Within this class, however, there were important social gradations, based in part on the ownership of land and houses, in part on social honour. Since there was relatively little economic specialisation in Pertosa, it was difficult to make any firm distinctions between peasants in terms of occupation. In fact, besides being smallholders, most peasants filled most of the occupational roles available in the local economy at some stage of the life cycle. The peasant hierarchy of prestige could be thought of as a continuum: at the bottom were the dishonoured and the landless, at the top families whose honour was unimpugned and who had sufficient land to meet their needs. The position of individual families on the scale was fluctuating and precarious: the misconduct of a daughter, the death of a household head, a bad harvest and a score of other factors of this sort could lead to a rapid descent.

In recent years it has become increasingly fashionable amongst Mediterranean sociologists to analyse social differentiation in terms of prestige ranking models. Some of them have also argued that in Mediterranean peasant societies it is inappropriate to talk of class or stratification.<sup>2</sup> In Pertosa, however, a class model is not only analytically helpful, but it also corresponds fairly closely to the way in which villagers perceive the social order.

The Pertosini model of the system of stratification is partly explicit, as, for example, when peasants talk about the differences between *signori* and *cafoni*, or discuss the way in which they are exploited by artisans. More commonly, however, it is expressed in the idiom of cultural symbols. Thus, for example, until very recently women from different social classes were expected to dress in different styles. Peasants wore a plain tunic dress which they covered in winter with a cotton shawl; artisans, a dress, canvas apron and a woolen shawl; the wives of the gentry, normal European-style frocks, winter coats and hats. These differences were not only highly visible, but were also enforced by the sanctions of public ridicule and gossip. Thus, in 1964, I saw a peasant woman who was returning to the village from Germany replace a smart winter coat by a flimsy shawl as soon as she arrived at the local railway station. She explained her behaviour by saying that she

didn't want it to be thought that she was putting on airs, nor risk the derision of the *signore* (upper class women). Similarly, there are important differences in speech, dialect and intonation between the various social classes.

Social class is also one of the main determinants of mate selection. Generally speaking, marriages in Pertosa are still arranged by parents, although children's preferences are nowadays readily taken into consideration. The main principle in choosing a marriage partner is summed up in the local saying '*Paro para piglia*' (literally, equal marries equal). Spouses must not only come from the same social class, but should also be of roughly similar economic and social standing within it. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, but they are of little structural importance. Thus, pretty or particularly well endowed girls sometimes marry men of a higher social class. However, since women take little part in public affairs and on marriage assume the status of their husbands, such marriages, although giving rise to comment and gossip, can be easily fitted into the village social system. On the other hand, I came across no cases of upper class women marrying down.

An example of the strength of the rule of homogamy can be found by examining inter-village marriages, which usually occur in situations of acute status inconsistency or when it is difficult to find a spouse of equivalent standing. Thus, dishonoured but rich peasant families seek to marry their daughters to people in nearby villages. Similarly, in recent years schoolmasters of peasant origin have without exception been obliged to take brides from outside Pertosa.

In Pertosa, honour plays no part in the class system. All Pertosini with whom I discussed the matter agreed that upper class families, however dishonoured, remain members of the gentry. Correspondingly, peasant households, however morally respectable, do not improve their class position. This point is well summarised in the proverb '*Le corna dei signori sono di paglia*' (Gentlemen's horns are made of straw). In respect to artisans and peasants, the economic and social standing of a member of the gentry is unaffected by the conduct of his wife, daughters or sisters.

On the other hand, each of the social classes is internally ranked on a number of scales, and amongst artisans and peasants honour is one of the most important of them. Thus, when I asked a number of peasant informants to put in rank order a pack of cards, each bearing the name of a peasant family, all assigned bottom place to the household of a fairly wealthy peasant who was known to have committed incest with two of his daughters. Nevertheless, although in exceptional cases high standing on one scale can be cancelled out by poor performance on another, there is a strong tendency

towards status consistency. In Pertosa, as in many other Mediterranean societies, wealth and honour are normally closely linked.<sup>3</sup> Unless there is clear evidence to the contrary, it is assumed that prosperous peasants are also honourable; and poor families are generally held to be of low moral repute.

During the last decade, the threefold system of stratification which I have been describing has been modified in two important respects. On the one hand, the gap between the social classes has narrowed; on the other, two incipient classes have emerged. Nowadays, one frequently hears upper class Pertosini complaining that their *ex-cafoni* earn as much as they do, or that they can afford to buy bigger and better cars. Clearly, these complaints are exaggerated, but it is nevertheless true that the disparity of income between peasants and gentry is declining. Emigrants have neither security of tenure, fringe benefits, nor pleasant working conditions, but they often earn as much as local civil servants. Conversely, the income which the gentry derive from land has conspicuously declined in the last few years.

Moreover, the barriers dividing peasants from artisans and shopkeepers have in part broken down, largely as a result of emigration. Most peasant families now have a fairly regular source of cash income, and no longer depend so much on credit provided by shopkeepers. As the demand for their skills has diminished, many artisans have been compelled to seek work outside the village, and nowadays their work situation is often identical to that of the peasants. Indeed, today, marriages between peasant and artisan families are becoming increasingly common.

The two incipient classes to which I have referred both developed in response to recent changes, in particular, as a result of growing state intervention in village affairs. The first consists of schoolteachers and civil servants, the sons and more occasionally the daughters of artisans and peasants who chose to invest in the education of their children. Although they work side by side with professionals from gentry families, and to a great extent share their recreational associations, so far, the latter have consistently refused to provide them with marriage partners. Indeed, one of the most important recent developments in local politics has been the growth of overt hostility and increasing competition between the gentry and the new professionals.

The second incipient class is made up of a few artisans (especially builders and building contractors), the wealthier shopkeepers and merchants and minor salaried employees of various local authorities. Like the new professionals, members of this class have peasant and artisan backgrounds. Similarly, they are beginning to associate more with each other than with people below or above them, and to set themselves apart from the classes

from which they came. Thus, in 1963, they founded their own 'traders' club' (*circolo dei commercianti*), and increasingly they are marrying amongst themselves.

In Pertosa there is little overt class conflict at least in any regular or organised form. As I go on to explain in Chapter 7, class is a poor predictor of voting behaviour. It is also interesting to note that in 1948, when the parties of the left preached class warfare throughout the South, and in many communes people occupied the land of leading gentry families, the peasants of Pertosa confined their protests to marching onto the property of the state forestry commission and made no attempt to take over the estates of the upper class.

This lack of conflict can be explained in part by the importance of vertical patron-client ties which cut across class loyalties, in part by the nature of the social classes themselves. All the social classes are characterised by intense internal competition for economic and political resources. Since most people are obliged to combine many different occupational roles in order to make a living, few families have identical interests or common life chances in the market. Moreover, in the eyes of many Pertosini success and social mobility are achieved not through cooperation but by manipulating social relationships with peers, and by attracting the support of powerful upper class patrons.

#### **Social Mobility**

The bulk of social mobility in Pertosa has come about in response to the expansion of the economic and political frontiers of the village in the last eighty years. The first phase of overseas migration in the years immediately before the First World War brought social mobility of two types: first, upward mobility on the peasant scale, secondly, a movement of peasants into the ranks of artisans. Most of the early emigrants invested their savings in land and houses. Some of them, however, went on to try to marry their daughters to artisans and to have at least one son apprenticed to a trade. In fact, almost one-third of the present generation of artisans and slightly more than half of their wives had peasant fathers who had emigrated. This process was costly, and in most cases it proved economically disadvantageous, since there were already too many artisans. It was costly not only because peasants had to forego the services of their children on the land, but also because they had to provide daughters with substantial dowries, and make series of gifts to the artisans to whom their sons were apprenticed, in order to ensure that they would be properly trained.

The social mobility prompted by the expansion of the political frontiers of the village can be most easily illustrated by examining the careers of members of the two incipient classes. Since the war, state intervention in village affairs has greatly increased, particularly in the fields of education and the social services. In Pertosa the number of schoolteachers has risen from a dozen to fifty, and in the same period communal and provincial employees have tripled their numbers.

Most of the minor salaried posts available in Pertosa are in the gift of the commune and the provincial authorities, and are distributed on a political spoils system.<sup>4</sup> These jobs are highly prized by peasants and artisans alike, partly, because by village standards they are well paid, partly, because they carry regular salaries, pensions and sickness benefits, and fair security of tenure. With very few exceptions, their present holders received them as a reward for political services. Normally, they are staunch party activists who are able to guarantee the votes of extensive networks of kin and friends to their political patrons. Similarly, most prosperous contractors and tradesmen have been successful because of their skills in political manipulation, for their businesses have been largely founded on lucrative government licences and contracts.

In 1965 there were about seventy schoolteachers and *impiegati* (civil servants with secondary education) living in Pertosa, of whom nearly two thirds came from artisan and, more occasionally, peasant families. In more than half the cases in which the children of artisans became schoolteachers, the mother was of a higher class than the father, usually the illegitimate or only partially recognised daughter or grand-daughter of a member of the gentry. In these cases the mother not only sought to recapture her own lost social status by encouraging her children to study, but could also count on the advice and help of upper class kinsmen. The latter were usually prepared to lend books or give extra lessons, and often used their influence to find a place for the aspiring student in a seminary.<sup>5</sup> Of the other schoolteachers of peasant and artisan origin, four or possibly five had been financed by a kinsman living abroad, two were the only children of prosperous peasant families and two belonged to households which were fortunate enough to have a steady income in the form of a war pension. Most of the rest were the younger brothers or sisters of employed schoolteachers, for once a newly qualified teacher has found work, he is expected to help his younger siblings.

As the result of the expansion of educational facilities in Pertosa and nearby towns over the last decade,<sup>6</sup> education is now seen as one of the main means of achieving social mobility. An increasing number of peasant and artisan families, especially those who receive remittances from abroad, are

investing their resources in the higher secondary education of their children. So far, they have generally preferred to provide schooling only for sons, although a small number of girls are enrolled in the teacher training college which has recently opened in the next town. In the next few years, however, it is probable that more and more girls will receive secondary education, for a teaching or professional diploma costs less than a dowry, and is equally if not more acceptable to potential husbands.

Although the political and economic changes of the last eighty years have provided the most ready avenues of mobility, the social classes in Pertosa have never been completely closed. Throughout the nineteenth century it appears to have been possible for the children of well-to-do peasants to become artisans, and a handful of peasants and artisans rose to the ranks of the gentry. The latter process took at least two generations; in the first, a family acquired land and property, in the second, education. Inter-marriage with established gentry families occurred only after the second generation. Indeed, in terms of overall numbers and in the amount of land under its control, the village upper class has remained remarkably constant over the last hundred years, rising peasant and artisan families having replaced and bought up the estates and mansions of bankrupt gentry.

#### Perceptions of Mobility

During the course of my fieldwork in Pertosa, I was intrigued by the sort of explanations which were used to account for the rapid social mobility, both upwards and downwards, of certain families. Upward mobility was attributed to one of three factors: conspicuous good fortune, cheating (*imbroglio*) and the power of *raccomandazioni*. Downward mobility was sometimes explained in terms of ill-fortune, but usually it was summed up in the phrase that the person or family in question was *troppo buono* (too good). Let me give some examples.

The good fortune theory normally explains how an ancestor of an upper class family found a treasure hidden by bandits. Similar theories appear to be widely diffused throughout southern Italy and indeed in other parts of the Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, they seem to have a long history. In 1878, in the course of the first major parliamentary inquiry into the conditions of agricultural labourers in southern Italy, the commissioner for the province of Potenza remarked upon the strange, and in his view mistaken, popular legends which were used to explain the origins of the wealth of the local gentry. Thus, he wrote,

'when one consults popular tradition one always finds at the origin of every large fortune a legend, treasure hidden by bandits, found

by chance in the corner of an old castle or in a newly acquired piece of land, or sometimes even a saddlebag full of gold buried by a long-dead military commander.<sup>8</sup>

Even today, similar stories are told in Pertosa and in most of the nearby communes. For example, one of them tells how Nicola Rossi, the great-grandfather of one of the richest landowners in the village, made his fortune in this way. The latter, a poor peasant, found a rich hoard of treasure whilst pruning an olive tree. He used it to buy land which has ever since brought prosperity to his descendants.

Although it is obviously difficult to assess the accuracy of these stories, on closer examination most of them appear to be false. Thus, when I checked with the land registry records I found that the father of Nicola Rossi was already a substantial yeoman farmer in 1807. In the course of the next fifty years, he and his sons frequently bought small plots of land from their neighbours, and steadily encroached on the communal demesne. This method of acquisition was far more consistent with the re-investment of savings accumulated by good management and hard work than with the spectacular purchases that might be expected to follow a sudden fortune, especially in a period in which large quantities of church and feudal land came onto the market at relatively low prices. Ultimately, however, it is of little importance whether these treasure tales are true or not. The point is that they are widely believed to be true by most Pertosini, whatever their social class.

One of the most conspicuous examples of social mobility is that of the brothers Martino, the sons of a prosperous blacksmith, who bought up most of the estates of the village's largest landowner just after the end of the First World War. Popularly, their success is attributed to their skills as *imbrogliani* (cheats). There is a saga of stories which tell how they organised black market commerce in wheat during both World Wars, how they cheated their peasants over the measurement of grain and in the payment of wages, and how they avoided the expropriation of land during the period of land reform. Whilst many of these stories are in part true, it is doubtful whether the commercial ethics of the Martinos were any different from those of other landowners. The difference lay in their success, for the most part due to the careful administration of their estates. They were one of the few landowning families that worked their lands directly and personally supervised the day-to-day running of their estates.

The assumption that good fortune and skill in cheating are the prime elements in upward social mobility has a close parallel in the explanations which are given for the rapid decline of certain families. The Amodios were undoubtedly the richest family in Pertosa in the nineteenth century. When



Pasquale Amodio died in 1908 he left an estate which, converted into present day values, was worth just over £500,000. In 1919 the family was declared bankrupt. According to one of its surviving members, the principal reasons for bankruptcy were economic fluctuations of the share market, and the devaluation of the lira during the First World War. Within Pertosa, however, a rather different interpretation prevails. The decline of the house is seen as the result of the reckless gambling and gullibility of the head of the family. He is reputed to have played cards with farms as the stake, and his bad luck has remained proverbial. To this explanation is added the fact that he was *troppo buono*, that he let himself be cheated too easily.

A more recent example of economic decline is that of the Rossi family, which in the last few years has been obliged to resort to a series of expedients in order to stave off bankruptcy. The reasons for its economic difficulties are threefold. In the first place, Don Vincenzo Rossi, the head of the family, has had to find considerable sums to pay the dowries of his two sisters. Secondly, he has been lax in the administration of his estates. Lastly, as a result of scarcity of labour in the last few years, large landowners in general have found it difficult to make a profit. The explanation given in Pertosa, however, is almost entirely focused on the second of these causes. Don Vincenzo is *troppo buono*. He has allowed himself to be cheated by his peasants and farm managers.

The third local explanation of social mobility which I wish to consider is the *raccomandazione*. Most civil servants, schoolteachers, and minor communal and provincial employees are exposed to the charge that they owe their jobs, or in the case of schoolteachers their success in public examinations, to the *raccomandazione* of a political patron. To this charge is sometimes added that of *imbroglio*, as, for example, when schoolteachers are accused of having bought their teaching certificates. Although it is true that appointments to minor posts in the gift of the commune and the provincial authorities, particularly jobs such as road-menders or school ushers for which no real skills are needed, are made on the recommendation of influential political leaders, these charges are more difficult to sustain when applied to school teachers or civil servants. I am not trying to argue that *raccomandazioni* do not exist in this sphere, but that accusations of corruption are often grossly exaggerated. Since most competitors in public examinations are furnished with *raccomandazioni*, they often cancel each other out and the most able candidates are appointed. It is, however, very difficult for a successful candidate to prove that the *raccomandazione* carried no weight, or to deny that his success was due to the influence of his patron.

The explanations of mobility which I have been examining are all highly selective. They are interesting as much for what they fail to explain as for what they explain. All portray the process of social mobility in ambiguous and unflattering terms. Implicitly, they deny the value of personal merit and endeavour. The importance of hard work and able administration is also ignored.

In Pertosa manual work has always been associated with low status. Indeed, one of the basic social divisions is between those who work with their hands, and those who do not. The word which in dialect is normally used to designate work is *fatica*, which can be used either as a noun, for example, in the phrase, '*Tienn fatica?*' (Do you have any work?), or as a verb. The nearest equivalent in English is the army term fatigue, which is used to describe a routine and unpleasant manual task, offering little hope of reward, and an expectation of punishment in the case of failure to perform it adequately. In Pertosa, however, *fatica*, as it is used by peasants and artisans, has a fairly neutral tone. For really unpleasant work there are two special words, *cunsarr* and *sacrificio*. The former literally means to work as a day labourer under a tyrannical master, and by extension has come to mean any especially hard work. The latter is most frequently used to denote the work situation of emigrants cut off from their families. Work, then, is seen as a part of the human condition, a monotonous and repetitive task associated with the annual cycle of agriculture. Whilst it is a necessary and valuable quality in a man that he should be a good worker, work itself promises no reward.

Perhaps the quality most associated with the socially mobile is *furberia*. *Furbo* can be translated as crafty or cunning. In the village context, however, it means rather more. A man is *furbo* if he succeeds in manipulating the mutual rights and obligations of a particular social relationship in his own favour. In Pertosa the institution of friendship is often used for this purpose. A man makes a series of short-lived friendships with the intention of exploiting the rights and privileges of the relationship without giving anything in return. If he succeeds, he gains the reputation of being *furbo*. His partner who allowed himself to be taken advantage of is called *fesso*, soft-witted. The polite form for *fesso* is *troppo buono* or *tre volte buono*.

Upward social mobility is, therefore, seen as the successful manipulation of social relationships. This theme is implicit in almost all the local explanations of mobility which I have considered. People prosper not through selling their skills in the market, nor by exploiting the economy, but by taking advantage of their fellows. Thus the Martinos succeeded by cheating their peasants; schoolteachers and civil servants find work not because

they have the necessary educational qualifications, but by manipulating political connections. Conversely, the Amodio and Rossi families declined because they allowed themselves to be exploited. Seen from this standpoint, the process of mobility is clearly socially disruptive. The socially mobile are a constant source of danger to those around them, for their success is achieved at the expense of others. It is not surprising, therefore, that the terms in which they are depicted are partial, ambiguous and often hostile.

#### Notes to chapter 5

- 1 In this period the term *cafoni* was still used in a neutral, non-derogatory way. Even in 1964 I occasionally heard peasants using it to describe themselves.
- 2 See for example, Pitt-Rivers, J. (1961:pp.81-82) Also, Stirling, P. (1966:222) and Davis, J. (1973).
- 3 Campbell (1964: 317).
- 4 For further details see chapter 8 below.
- 5 Many schoolteachers in Pertosa were educated in seminaries, not because they had any intention of becoming priests, but because it was the cheapest form of secondary education.
- 6 A *scuola media*, providing three years of secondary schooling, was set up in Pertosa in 1964. A teacher training college was opened in a nearby town in 1965.
- 7 See for example Pitt-Rivers (1961: 52), Djilas (1958: 143-4).
- 8 *Atti della giunta per la inchiesta agraria e sulla condizioni della classe agricola*, Vol.IX, fasc. 1, p. XXV (Potenza, 1883).