

# Society and Politics in the Age of the Risorgimento

Essays in honour of Denis Mack Smith



Edited by John A. Davis and Paul Ginsborg

*Society and Politics in the Age of the Risorgimento* contains ten essays written in honour of Denis Mack Smith by leading British and Italian specialists. The volume is intended both as a tribute to Denis Mack Smith's outstanding contribution to Italian history and as an attempt to open up wider debate on Italian society and politics in the period of the Risorgimento, bringing aspects of nineteenth-century Italian politics and social history into a comparative European context.

Topics discussed in the volume include the collapse of the *ancien régime* in southern Italy; the Italian armies in the Napoleonic period; debates on poverty in Italy and Europe in the early nineteenth century; family and marriage; the origins of Mafia in Sicily; peasant protest in the Po valley; Garibaldi and England in the 1860s; the emergence of an Italian middle class; women workers; and the politics of Francesco De Sanctis.

*Contributors*: Marzio Barbagli, Derek Beales, Simonetta Ortaggi Cammarosano, John A. Davis, Giovanna Fiume, Paul Ginsborg, Adrian Lyttelton, Franco Della Peruta, Denis Mack Smith, Stuart Woolf

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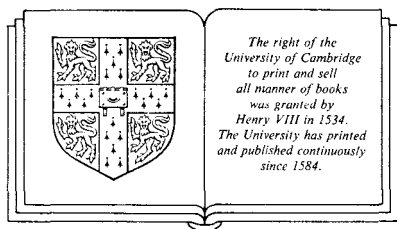
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## Preface

This volume of essays is published in honour of Denis Mack Smith and in acknowledgement of the unique role that he has played in promoting the study and understanding of Italian history in this country. In a career that already spans more than four decades, Denis Mack Smith has written more widely and influentially on contemporary Italian history than any other non-Italian. In so doing he has established an unparalleled reputation both in Italy and in the English-speaking world.

The breadth of his reputation owes much to the fact that he has the gift of writing original, serious, and scrupulously researched history which none the less remains accessible and attractive to the non-specialist – a rare talent that has won him recognition as one of the finest historical biographers writing in English today. This ability to reach out beyond the confines of academic audiences has enabled him to play a critically important role in first reviving and then stimulating and widening an interest in Italian history. His works have inspired younger generations of professional historians of Italy, as well as being very well received by university students, school-teachers, and the general reading public.

That is not to say that his work has been uncontroversial, and indeed another of his talents as a historian has always been to provoke. When his first major book, *Cavour and Garibaldi*, was published in 1954, A. J. P. Taylor commented: ‘with brilliant, though well-founded perversity, Mr Mack Smith turns things upside down’. *Cavour and Garibaldi* certainly did turn upside down an accepted image of Italian Unification as the fruit of the harmonious and concerted action of great men and patriots; by going back to contemporary debates and battles, Mack Smith showed instead the extent to which Italian independence and national unity had been born out of internal conflict and disunity.

The central theme of this famous book was not only the defeat of Garibaldi by Cavour in the struggle to settle the political future of the unified state once independence from Austria had been achieved, but also the destruction of those idealistic and heroic aspirations that had inspired the struggle for independence.

This critical view of the outcome of the Risorgimento has remained one of the constants of Mack Smith's writings, in sharp contrast to the heroic terms in which earlier English writers like Trevelyan had depicted the Italian struggles for independence. It has found close echoes in Mack Smith's search to identify the historical causes of the rise of Fascism. This was the theme of his enormously successful *Italy: A Modern History*, first published in 1959. His insistence on the fatal flaws that accompanied the birth of the Liberal state was not a view that everyone was prepared to accept. Indeed, it provoked furious debate. But, as well as arousing dissent, Mack Smith's interpretation coincided closely with the conclusions of more than a few Italian historians and his participation in these historical controversies gave Italy's past a wider international audience as well as constituting an important episode in Anglo-Italian cultural history.

After the publication of *Italy: A Modern History*, Mack Smith turned his attention for a decade and more to Fascism and its leader. But the nineteenth century has never been far from his sight, as is evident from the new biography of Cavour published in 1984. The Risorgimento and the reign of Victor Emanuel II also provided the starting point for his most recent publication, which takes the Italian monarchy as a vantage point for a study that sweeps across a remarkably eventful century of Italian history. In these more recent studies – as in the new essay on Francesco De Sanctis that forms part of this volume – he has revised, but in general stood by and reinforced, his earlier judgements on the political legacy of the Risorgimento and the short-comings of Liberal Italy.

Such a synoptic resumé cannot do justice to the breadth of Denis Mack Smith's work or the fineness of his judgements, but it does provide an essential introduction to the essays that follow. While these are offered as a tribute from friends and colleagues here and in Italy, they are not intended as a formal Festschrift, not least because Denis Mack Smith was appalled at such a project. In any case, a Festschrift that adequately reflected the range of his interests and his contributions to Italian history in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries would not be easily contained in a single volume. But above all, although he

retired as a senior research fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, in 1987, Denis Mack Smith is still very much a working historian whose productivity shows no sign of slackening. For all these reasons the editors felt that a tribute from British and Italian colleagues working in the field of nineteenth-century Italian history should most fittingly take the form of 'work-in-progress'.

Italian Unification has always held a particular fascination for British audiences, yet until quite recently both Italian and non-Italian historians have tended to concentrate their attention on the twentieth rather than the nineteenth century, and especially on the Fascist period. But the more thoroughly the inter-war period has been explored, the more historians have begun to ask new questions about what went before it and what came after. As a result, the agenda of research on modern Italy has broadened notably in recent years. On the one hand, this has led to new research on the period after Fascism, and in particular on the political, cultural, and social changes that took place in the 1940s and 1950s. On the other, there has also been what might be described as a modest but distinct rediscovery of the nineteenth century.

The new directions taken by recent research on the nineteenth century are reflected in many of the essays that follow. They indicate most obviously the growing importance of social history and the awareness of the need to set political change in its social and institutional contexts. In more than one respect, the new social history has followed the example given by Mack Smith in his pioneering article, written as long ago as 1950, on 'The peasants' revolt in Sicily, 1860'. But it is only in the last decade that the social history of modern Italy has begun to come fully into its own.

This is not to say that the older agenda has been abandoned or that the political struggles for independence and unification have lost their importance. It is, rather, to claim that the historical explanation of the achievements and failures of the Risorgimento can be enormously refined and enriched by examining every aspect of Italian society in the nineteenth century, and by trying to connect the social to the political.

This changing emphasis has also served to encourage more comparative approaches, since in many cases the Italian experience was much less particular than has often been assumed. A comparative perspective is evident in many of the essays that follow, whether their subject matter is the crisis of the *ancien régime* states, the experience of service in the Grande Armée, attitudes towards poverty, Garibaldi's visit to Britain, or the emergence of a new middle class. Developments in

Italy are seen as variants on more general European patterns whose particular characteristics become evident only through comparative study. In other cases, such as the development of family structures, the conditions of women workers, the impact of agrarian unrest or the development of new systems of power in the context of rapid social and institutional change, the analysis is necessarily more case-specific; but here, too, there are constant references to other models and experiences, and hence to wider comparisons.

While a volume of this sort is necessarily eclectic, we hope that as a whole it bears the imprint of the two themes outlined above – the social and the comparative. It is our intention to bring discussion of Italy more fully into those recent debates amongst social historians which have tended, in this country at least, to privilege Britain, France, and Germany. Naturally, this collection of essays cannot pretend to offer a comprehensive panorama of Italian social and political history in the nineteenth century. What it does aim to do is to widen discussions on Italian history; to encourage younger historians to take up the challenges and unanswered questions it poses; and to strengthen contacts and exchanges between British and Italian historians: three fields in which Denis Mack Smith's contributions have been quite outstanding.

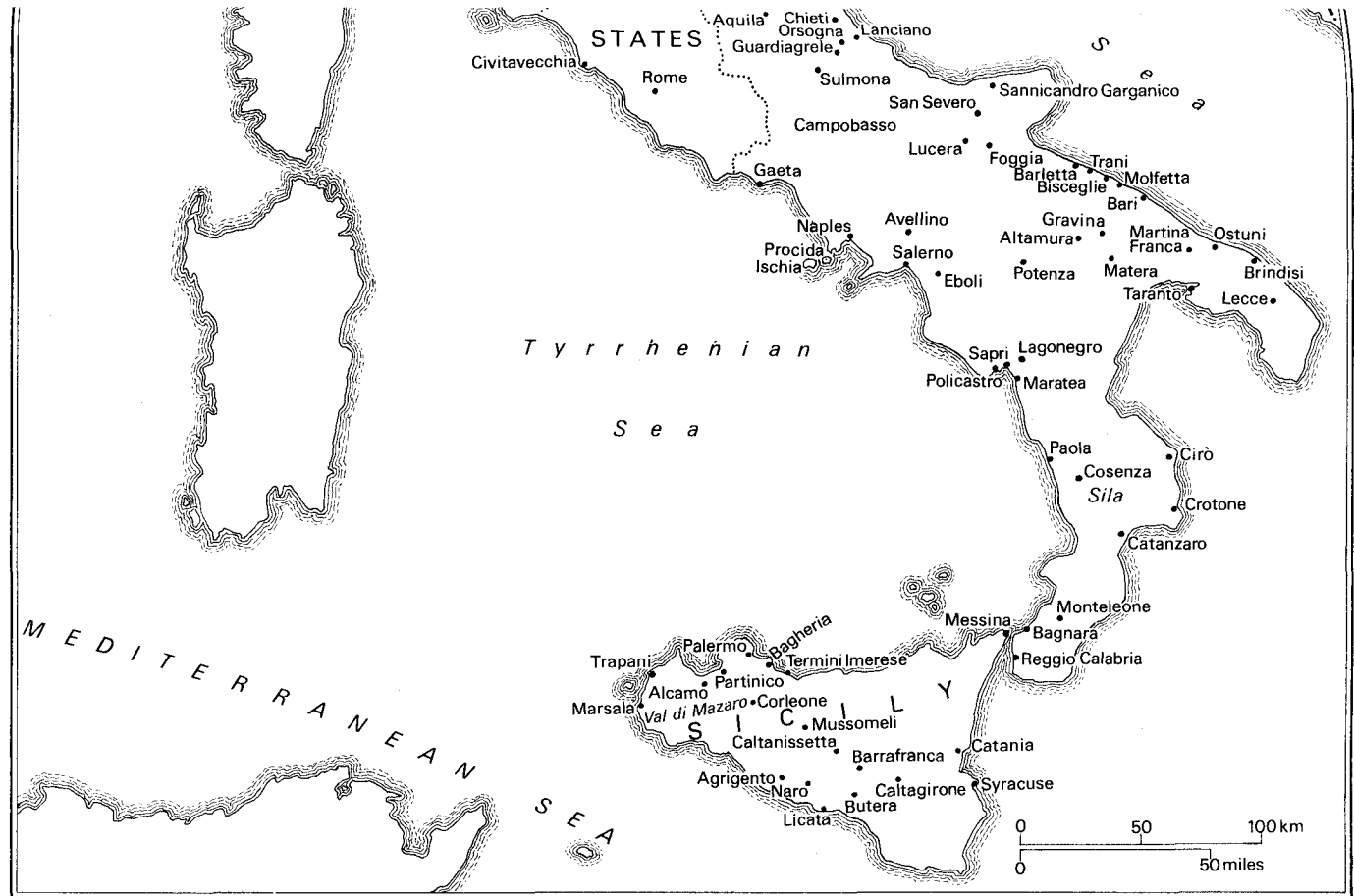


Italy in 1815





Italy in 1870



Italy - place names

*Labouring women in northern and central Italy in the  
nineteenth century*

SIMONETTA ORTAGGI CAMMAROSANO

THE LEGACY OF THE ANCIEN RÉGIME

In Italy, as elsewhere, waged work for women did not have its origins in the factory system. Quite the opposite is true: industrialization only reinforced and perfected tendencies which were already very much part of Italy's previous economic development. In fact, at the end of the nineteenth century the fierce objections to a bill regulating the condition of women's factory work derived not only from women's essential role in factories but also from their contribution to other crucial sectors of the economy, like agriculture and the putting-out system, both still organized along traditional lines. The condition of women in nineteenth-century Italy can best be summarized as follows: a yawning gap existed between the importance of women's labour in production and the minimum recognition accorded to them in terms of political and civil rights. So vast a discrepancy had its roots deep in the society of the *ancien régime*.

The case of Venice at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth illustrates the importance of women's work in the economic life of a great urban centre. 'Nearly all the women of the lower classes work for the Arti', noted Apollonio Del Senno, author of a commentary on the 1797 census of arts and crafts in the city.<sup>1</sup> The registers of craft guilds reflect the variety of women's work, from the making of buttons, pearls, and bracelets to that of shoes and hats; from the working of gold, pewter, and glass to serving in barbers' shops and selling spirits. According to the Venetian census of 1762, the number of women working in industry was 3,284, out of a

<sup>1</sup> L. Dal Pane, *Storia del lavoro in Italia dagli inizi del secolo XVIII al 1815* (2nd edn, Milan 1958), p. 76.

total of 33,930 enrolled in the guilds, and nearly half of them were employed in the silk industry. But such statistics underestimated the real picture. According to a more reliable estimate of numbers in the silk industry in 1773, alongside the thousand or so wives and daughters of the foremen and masters there worked no less than 5,000 other women. Theirs were the humbler and poorer paid jobs of winding and warping, and other work that could be done at home.<sup>2</sup>

Turning from the cities to the countryside, the focus of our attention shifts from the artisan shop to nascent capitalist industry, organized on the basis of the putting-out system. 'One cannot study eighteenth-century labour', wrote Luigi Dal Pane in his monumental *Storia del lavoro*,

without being struck by the very widespread presence of women in the textile industries. In northern and central Italy, in every centre however large or small, spinning and weaving were being done for the merchants and the factories, and there was not a single merchant or manufacturer who did not have an overwhelming majority of female labour on his books.<sup>3</sup>

In the Piedmontese factories producing organzine, the greater part of the workforce was female. In Lombardy women were responsible for the spinning and winding of silk and often for its weaving as well. In Tuscany, the spinning and weaving of flax and hemp was women's work, as was the drawing and weaving of silk and the making of straw hats.

The countryside played an ever greater role in this spreading industrial activity. Women worked in their own homes in the winter months; in the summer they alternated work in the fields with that at the loom; throughout the year they provided a modest but indispensable contribution to family incomes. Their work supplied the nascent forces of capitalism with a nearly inexhaustible supply of labour at low cost; it enabled the landowner to maintain the numerical strength of his workforce, in spite of the low level of agricultural revenues; and it contributed, in general terms, to lessening the social repercussions of industrial crises.

At the time of the grave silk crisis of 1787 Cesare Beccaria stressed how the 'disorder' created by unemployment was not 'particular to the city of Como, but general to the whole State'. However, those inhabitants who were 'scattered and spread throughout the country-

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 167 and 580-3. See also, by the same author, *Il tramonto delle corporazioni in Italia (secoli XVIII e XIX)*, (Milan 1940), p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Dal Pane, *Storia del lavoro*, p. 166.

side' could more easily find 'help and subsidies, which derived from the self-interest of the local landowners if not from their humanity'. In Como itself, though, Beccaria suggested that only a State intervention along the lines of providing flax to spin in place of silk would alleviate the plight of a 'great number of persons, mainly unemployed women', whom the crisis had deprived of work.<sup>4</sup>

In Piedmont, women's contribution to the working of silk had, as early as 1667, become clearly defined as wage labour. In that year the Regulations passed by sovereign edict provided a code of discipline which governed the mode, the hours, and the payment of work. On this last point the discontinuity of women's work, due above all to domestic and family commitments, emerged very clearly; this was a problem that was to become notorious when factory work was introduced at a later date. The Regulations, in fact, required that female silk workers 'continue to work for the whole season in order to gain greater skill by long practice, and in the case of legitimate impediment they must provide substitutes who have been approved by the Deputy'.<sup>5</sup>

It was above all in Tuscany, with the Grand Duke's Enquiry of 1766, that we find the first wide-ranging account of the absolute prevalence of women in industrial work, a phenomenon which was clearly to characterize the first half of the nineteenth century as well. The enquiry illustrated the various circumstances and characteristics of women's work: the decisive contribution of large and small *rural* centres, the waged nature of work and its exploitative character, the poverty of rural society which pushed women to look beyond domestic spinning and weaving, thus transforming their work into an external, specialized, and dependent activity.<sup>6</sup>

Flax and hemp, materials much in use amongst the peasant and popular classes, provided work for women spinners, a veritable army of dependent workers whose low wages were made lower still by the uses and abuses of the truck system, and for a great number of women weavers (in the large rural centre of Pontassieve the officials of the enquiry numbered almost 1,700 female spinners and 117 weavers). The

<sup>4</sup> C. Beccaria, *Opere*, ed. S. Romagnoli (2 vols., Florence 1971), vol. II, pp. 520-1.

<sup>5</sup> 'Regole per i filatori, e lavoranti da seta, & altri venditori d'essa (14 maggio 1667)', in *Editti antichi e nuovi de' sovrani principi della Real Casa di Savoia*, ed. G. B. Borelli, part III, book X (Turin 1681), pp. 1,088-9 (quotation from p. 1,089).

<sup>6</sup> 'Dati estratti dall'inchiesta ordinata da Pietro Leopoldo il 25 novembre 1766', in Dal Pane, *Storia del lavoro*, appendix 3, pp. 477-561. The quotations which appear from here onwards in the text, with page references in brackets, are taken from this source.

weavers had a certain direct share of the market, providing poor peasant homes with the flax and hemp cloth used both for clothing and linen.

The destitution of these labouring women in the small and large rural centres of Tuscany constitutes something approaching a *leitmotiv* in the pages of the Grand Duke Leopold's Enquiry. Sometimes the functionaries took care to stipulate that the spinners were 'the wives of agricultural day labourers' (p. 546); at others that the spinning and weaving of flax and hemp was 'carried out in particular by *donne miserabili*' (p. 518). They also underlined the difficulties created by the tax on looms: 'Every loom is subject to a tax burden of nineteen *soldi*, with the result that the clamour of protesting women's voices can be heard.' The enquiry suggested the suppression of the tax, in order to save 'the poor weavers from the direct collection of the tax, which sometimes they have forgotten or have been unable to pay, and which costs a greater amount to collect than the income from the tax itself' (p. 473). The enquiry demanded forcefully that steps be taken against the truck system, to ensure that 'at least half of wages be paid in cash and the other half in goods which are genuinely of equivalent worth' (p. 553).

Bearing in mind regional variations, the picture painted above is going to be a typical one for the following century as well, though with still sharper colours and clearer contrasts. The impoverishment of the rural population and the spread of textile working in the countryside, accompanied by the widespread use of female and child labour, are phenomena which grow in importance in the first half of the nineteenth century. To them we must add the new but connected processes produced by industrialization.

#### THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: SOME QUANTITATIVE DIMENSIONS OF WOMEN'S WORK

Any attempt to reconstruct the statistical importance of women in the productive life of nineteenth-century Italy encounters more than a few difficulties. The language of economics and of statistics at that time was generally male in both tone and content: the surveys speak of *operai*, *filatori*, and *tessitori*, even when in reality these were women workers. Work done at home, almost exclusively a female preserve, all too easily escaped the statistician's notice. To these defects must be added others:

the delay in adopting protective legislation governing women's factory work (and as a result the lack of enquiries and commissions dealing with the subject); the late date at which women's work at home became a subject for study and research; the unreliable nature of all statistics in pre-Unification Italy.

As director of the newly founded statistical office of the Italian State, Pietro Maestri denounced the criteria which had governed the collection of statistics prior to Unification: 'It is sufficient', he wrote,

to remember that only in the Kingdom of Sardinia had a free system of publicizing statistics already been adopted for a number of years. The administrations of the other Italian States used statistics purely as a governmental instrument and often as a secret one at that. The result was that they came to conclusions which at best represented merely the exterior profile of the facts, or which gave rise to illusions and errors.

The statistics produced were thus 'fragmentary, incomplete, and often contradictory'.<sup>7</sup>

If, therefore, it is quite impossible to attribute to pre-Unification statistics an absolute value, the language of numbers still retains a certain eloquence in relative terms. In the 1841 census of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, female workers are only a third of the number of male workers in agriculture, but in industrial activities they are more numerous than men. The slight predominance in this sector accorded by the census to women (102,105 as against 99,262 men) was probably much greater in reality. The group of 288,695 women classed as housewives, of whom 227,586 were in the rural areas, certainly contained a large number of women working at home.<sup>8</sup>

This was not an isolated phenomenon, nor one limited to the first half of the century, but a national reality which was to be typical of the following decades. In 1864 a cautious supporter of the movement for female emancipation, Enrico Fano, drew attention to the importance of the role that working-class and peasant women played in the economic life of the nation. 'In our country', he observed, quoting the 1861 census as evidence, 'women work far more than men do. In manual industries 1,379,905 men are employed, compared to 1,692,740 women; in other words for every hundred male artisans there are 123

<sup>7</sup> *Le pubblicazioni della Direzione di statistica. Relazione a S.E. il Ministro di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio con note bibliografiche e sommari statistici fatta dal Direttore Dott. Pietro Maestri e parere della Giunta consultiva di statistica* (Florence 1869), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> P. Bandettini, *La popolazione della Toscana alla metà dell'Ottocento*, 'Archivio Economico dell'unificazione Italiana', vols. III-IV, pt. I (Turin 1956), pp. 114-19.

females' (the male-female ratio in the Italian population at that time was 1,000/998).<sup>9</sup>

Two realities underlay these statistics on the conspicuous role of women in industrial activity. The first was that of the enduring rural character of Italy; industry, carried out at home and on a seasonal basis, remained to a great extent integrated with agriculture. The second was that of a society in which the widespread employment of women and children in industry, even in the heaviest jobs and those most hazardous for their health, was considered a natural state of affairs, having its origins in the long-standing traditions of rural society.

In this context it was highly significant that the outcry over factory conditions in Lombardy and Piedmont in the 1840s was aimed at protecting children, both male and female, but not the women who worked alongside them in equal numbers.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the bill of 1886 which aimed to regulate the conditions of both female and child labour, became law after a decade of discussions, but only after the removal of all clauses referring to women. Legislation covering women's work in factories was finally passed in 1902.

The numerical preponderance of working women in industrial activities, so revealing a statistic of Italian social reality at the moment of Unification, had diminished by the time of the census of 1881. At that date the number of men employed in industry had become slightly greater than that of women (1,853,656 to 1,823,134). However, these new figures did not represent the sudden reversal of a long-standing situation; rather they were the result of a new method of classification, which sought to represent industrial production in an exclusively modern and industrialized sense. The industrial 'working class' was separated from that great mass of women workers who, in the cities but above all in the countryside, continued to be involved in industrial production on a discontinuous and seasonal basis. In spite of their disappearance from the official statistics, these labouring women remained an essential part of the economic and social fabric of the country.

The weight of their numbers was clear from the 1871 census, which had classed no less than 4,067,449 women in the category of those of

<sup>9</sup> E. Fano, *Della carità preventiva e dell'ordinamento delle società di mutuo soccorso in Italia* (Milan 1868), p. 224.

<sup>10</sup> See for example the well-known works of C. I. Petitti di Roreto, *Del lavoro dei fanciulli nelle manifatture. Dissertazione* (1841), now in *Opere scelte*, ed. G. M. Bravo (2 vols., Turin 1969), vol. 1, pp. 591-691, and of G. Sacchi, 'Sullo Stato dei fanciulli occupati nelle manifatture', in *Annali Universali di Statistica*, 73 (1842), 233-65.



'unspecified employment'. This was precisely because of the difficulty of defining their work, varied and discontinuous as it was, and always linked with the tasks of running a household and being a mother. However, in the census of 1881 this whole category was simply eliminated. Women of 'unspecified employment' were now grouped under the catch-all heading of *massaie* (housewives), a category which suddenly leaped from 393,839 persons in 1871 to 3,720,906 ten years later. Hundreds of thousands of women from the lower classes who added some form of productive work to their household duties in order to balance family budgets now figured, in statistical terms, simply as '*massaie*'.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth pointing out that in the census of 1881 women spinners (*filatrici*) were grouped in a category of their own. Spinning had continued to be a major source of employment for country women throughout the nineteenth century. The enormous number of women and girls employed in this sector (877,837 women and 80,745 girls under the age of nine in 1881) represented for the compilers of the census an anomaly which threatened to obscure the modernizing image of industrial Italy on which they wished to focus. It was actually an indicator of another, equally important, social process: the increasing impoverishment of the rural population throughout the century, and the extra weight of responsibility thrust upon women as a consequence. As the rural population became poorer, the need for women to earn extra money became ever more important. The southern countryside was most affected by this phenomenon, but all of rural Italy was touched by it in one way or another.

#### SPINNERS

Women's work grew out of the multiform and variegated nature of domestic work. To spin and to weave for the needs of the family was as much a habitual part of a women's day as it was to cook or to do the washing. As an independent activity, spinning was exclusively a female preserve; the Tuscan census of 1811 explained that spinning, even if practised with 'assiduity', was only able to supply one-half of one person's material needs. It therefore seemed appropriate that such work

<sup>11</sup> L. Bodio, 'Relazione finale sul censimento generale della popolazione del 1881', in Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, *Annali di Statistica*, 3rd series, vol. XIV (1885), pp. 87-114 (quotation from p. 100).

be consigned to women, who were able to integrate it with their other activities.<sup>12</sup>

The same census once again confirmed the predominantly rural character of this work. In Lombardy, in spite of the crisis in flax production after 1815, about 30,000 women continued to spin the material in the countryside; their low wages (not more than 24 *lire* for 150 days of part-time work) enabled the industry to survive.<sup>13</sup> In the middle of the century the noted Piedmontese scholar and politician, Carlo Ilarione Petitti di Roreto, remarked upon the 'immense number of females' who were deriving some form of income from spinning flax and hemp by hand, at the distaff or on the spinning-wheel, and expressed his fears for the future of agriculture once mechanized spinning deprived women of this source of income.<sup>14</sup>

However, the second half of the century did not see the decline of importance in spinning as women's work. In 1861 there were 'at least 300,000' peasant women across the country who were spinning flax and hemp.<sup>15</sup> And even before the census of 1881 brought to light the existence of a veritable army of women spinners, industrial statistics of the late 1870s had noted with some preoccupation the solidity and tenacity of this type of women's work in rural areas. For flax and hemp in particular, it was calculated that some 500,000 quintals of thread had been 'spun by hand by the women of our countryside during the long winter *veglie* [the evening gatherings in the stables or kitchens]', five times more than that produced by mechanical means.<sup>16</sup>

By time-honoured custom, in fact, it was during the *veglie* of the winter evenings that women's work was done. At the end of the eighteenth century Giuseppe Baretti wrote that in the winter the peasants 'gather in their stables where their animals are, and there they sing, dance, work, tell stories and court each other'.<sup>17</sup> More than a century later, it was still within this intensely social context that women's spinning found its principal place. Women of the Piedmontese countryside, born at the end of the nineteenth century, remembered that the stables were opened in the autumn and closed at carnival time (February). The most popular stables were those 'where there were

<sup>12</sup> L. Dal Pane, *Industria e commercio nel Granducato di Toscana nell'età del Risorgimento*, vol. II: *L'Ottocento* (Bologna 1973), p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> B. Caizzi, *L'economia lombarda durante la Restaurazione (1814-1859)* (Milan 1972), p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> Petitti di Roreto, *Del lavoro dei fanciulli*, pp. 597-98.

<sup>15</sup> P. Maestri, *L'Italia economica nel 1868* (Florence 1868), p. 206.

<sup>16</sup> V. Ellena, 'La statistica di alcune industrie italiane', *Annali di Statistica*, 2nd series, 13 (1880), 93 and 101.

<sup>17</sup> G. Baretti, *Gl'Italiani o sia Relazione degli usi e costumi d'Italia* (Milan 1818), p. 239.

teenage girls'. For the boys 'it was through the *veglia* that they met girls'; they went to the stables in groups, sometimes taking as presents the instruments of the spinning trade, 'l ruet e 'l pendulin, the distaff and the rings with which to fix it to the belt.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that spinning took place during the *veglia* was taken by contemporary accounts as justification for the fact that such work found a natural place in a women's day. Thus in the Tuscan census of 1811, women were said to devote themselves to spinning 'in the hours in which they are resting from their other duties'. In reality, the fact that even in their moments of 'rest' these rural women were at work merely confirmed that their days were made up of an incessant stream of activity, of household chores, family duties, and of work for others.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century it was commonplace to note that the spinners earned for their labours little more than 'a crust of bread or a few coins with which to buy some salt'.<sup>19</sup> None the less, this income was a crucial element in family budgets, and in both Tuscany and Piedmont grave fears were expressed that its elimination would destroy irrevocably the fragile equilibrium of rural society. Proverbs which were still in common usage in Piedmont at the beginning of the twentieth century bear testimony to this fact: *Donna alla rocca, felice a chi tocca* ('Find a woman who can spin, you'll be as happy as a pin'), *Donna al telaio, marito senza guaio* ('With the wife at the loom, a husband need fear no doom').<sup>20</sup> Oral testimonies of peasant life at the end of the nineteenth century reveal the continuing importance of spinning in women's life, and of female children being involved in the work as a matter of course. Giovanna Mosca recalled: 'At ten years old I was already able to spin the *rista* (a hemp fibre of inferior quality).' Such work gave girls the possibility of saving for their dowry; it could also be the source of odious forms of exploitation. One woman recalled how her mother, while still a child, went as a serving girl to a peasant family in the years between 1870 and 1880: 'if she worked until midnight spinning hemp she could expect a bowl of soup; if not, she got nothing'.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> N. Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti. Testimonianze di vita contadina* (2 vols., Turin 1977), vol. 1, pp. 141-2 (Angela Ginsiano), 87 (Giuseppe Macario), 92 (Bartolomeo Spada), 84 (Anna Lucia Giordanengo).

<sup>19</sup> P. O. Toscano, 'Filande del lino in Toscana', in *Annali Universali Statistica*, 52 (1837), 216-17 (quotation from p. 216).

<sup>20</sup> L. Bertello, 'Per uno studio della storia e della cultura contadina: i bollettini parrocchiali dell'Albese' in *Quale Storia per quali contadini*, ed. G. De Luna and P. Grimaldi (Turin 1987), pp. 55-64 (quotation from p. 59).

<sup>21</sup> Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, vol. II, p. 183 (Giovanna Mosca), and vol. I, p. 32 (Caterina Toselli).

## WOMEN WEAVERS

The cultivation of flax and hemp had, as we have seen, deep roots in the Italian countryside. Over the course of the centuries, weaving, like spinning, had provided peasant women with a steady flow of work. However, weaving had an element of specialization about it, even if carried out at home with constant interruptions. It also, as we have seen for Tuscany at the end of the eighteenth century, had limited but direct outlets onto the market through kinship and neighbourhood networks.

As the market grew, it was natural that the manufacturers should seek to extend their control over dispersed rural production. In the Napoleonic era, many of the looms in the Tuscan countryside which were used for flax, wool, and hemp belonged to women who no longer worked for themselves, but for urban merchants and manufacturers (of whom there were about fifty in Florence at this time).<sup>22</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, the picture had changed somewhat. On the one hand, there was a greater specialization of work at the loom: 'scattered through the villages of all Tuscany', many women now 'concentrated exclusively on the job of weaving, passing from one cloth to another according to the commissions given to them by particular buyers'.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, there were the increased controls being exercised by the 'manufacturers', with looms sometimes being physically concentrated in one place.

The women remained free to choose between work in the factory or work at home. In fact, as one of the entrepreneurs explained when describing the system which was still in operation some three decades later, 'because each loom is a hand loom, it can be taken by a woman either to her home or to the factory'.<sup>24</sup> However, this was a relative freedom. The women who chose to work at home received a lower rate of pay for piecework (in 1870 the rates were fifty *centesimi* for work at home, and eighty for that in the factory). Home workers thus had the choice of recouping by working longer hours, which they had to try and fit in along with housework and looking after the children (who were, of course, the prime motive for staying at home); or else of resigning themselves to earning less.

<sup>22</sup> Dal Pane, *Industria e Commercio*, vol. II, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Rapporto generale della pubblica Esposizione dei prodotti naturali e industriali della Toscana fatta in Firenze nel 1850* (Florence 1851), p. 218.

<sup>24</sup> *Atti del Comitato della inchiesta industriale, Deposizioni scritte*, vol. II, *Tessitura del lino e della canapa* (Rome 1873), p. 13.

At Prato the evolution from home working to factory production was greatly aided by the presence of a large number of women weavers, working at home, highly skilled, and already to a great degree dependent upon local manufacturers. In 1840-1, in the textile workshops of Prato, 1,298 women and only eighteen men worked on the old wooden looms, producing for the traditional sector of 'cloth for the use of peasants' (made of a mixture of wool and cotton, or cotton and hemp, or hemp and flax). In the woollen sector, the working of the new spinning machines was entrusted to men, but even here there were still far more women than men weavers (1,074 as against 338).<sup>25</sup>

During these years, the spread of cotton cloths, even amongst the popular classes, highlighted the difficulties of continuing to produce in an isolated and autonomous fashion. In 1835, for example, at Fucecchio, a large town in the plain between Florence and Pisa, a major crisis shook the local textile industry, caused by the 'low price of foreign cloths'. The *linaioli*, whom the merchants employed to distribute raw flax to the spinners, were badly hit; but so too were 'the women spinners and weavers, who have no employment'.<sup>26</sup> The case of Fucecchio was part of a more generalized crisis, which affected various parts of the country at different times and to different degrees, and pushed the women of the rural centres towards alternative types of employment such as lacework or making straw hats, or else into the factories. Where production had previously involved the whole family, factory labour dissolved the family as a productive unit, and radically changed the division of labour between the sexes.

In the poorer agricultural regions, entire families once lived from the products of the looms. A peasant woman interviewed in the middle of the 1970s, Margherita Lovera, described the work that she and her husband once did in a far-flung village in the mountains of the province of Cuneo in Piedmont. The period she remembered was the inter-war one, but the techniques she described for making the bails of hemp and cotton cloth for the peasants of the plain undoubtedly dated a long way further back: 'I had twenty threads at the bottom, and then in two hours I tied the thousand threads at the top. I worked with the reels and finally ... with a flour paste I glued the threads, I made them equal, and with the brushes I made sure they were all level.' But the heaviest work

<sup>25</sup> 'Prospetto sommario della quantità, qualità e prodotti delle fabbriche opificiarie della città di Prato dall'anno 1840 all'anno 1841', in E. Repetti, *Dizionario geografico fisico storico della Toscana*, vol. iv (Florence 1841), p. 653.

<sup>26</sup> G. Biagioli, 'I problemi dell'economia Toscana e della mezzadria nella prima metà dell'Ottocento', in *Contadini e proprietari nella Toscana moderna*, vol. II, *Dall'età moderna all'età contemporanea* (Florence 1981), pp. 85-172 (quotation from p. 131).

was done by her husband; it was he 'who made the loom work with the pedals, who pulled the cloth, and you needed a lot of strength for that',<sup>27</sup> because it was necessary to launch the heavy wooden shuttle which inserted the weft along the whole length of the piece of cloth. Work such as this, except heavier still, as wool was the raw material, had made the reputation of the weavers of the Biellese.

The mechanized wool mill also developed in areas which, like the Biellese and the Vicentino, could boast a long tradition of home working. At Schio, when Alessandro Rossi took over his father's mill in the middle of the nineteenth century, he brought into the factory all the old manual wooden looms, and encouraged immigration towards Schio from the surrounding rural areas. But he was well aware that 'modern industry, being concentrated in factories, has created conditions that are little favourable to the operative, who has lost the possibility of working at home'. According to Rossi, employers had 'to make every effort to compensate the worker in some way for the family life of which he has been deprived'.<sup>28</sup> In spite of Rossi using the male form, *operaio*, he was well aware that these considerations were of particular importance for women. It was they who previously had been used to working at home, and to using all their ingenuity to keep their children busy and content while they did so. Now they had to accustom themselves to the demands of uninterrupted work at the machines. It was for these women that Rossi founded the kindergarden at Schio, which played an important role in favouring the influx of immigrant workers towards his mill.<sup>29</sup>

In the factory, women at first performed the tasks to which they were already accustomed when working at home. They prepared the spools and the chains of the warp, they helped to choose the wools, they corrected with careful and delicate stitching the errors in weaving. But the introduction of the mechanized loom, and its diffusion in the 1870s throughout the factories in the north, transformed the division of labour between the sexes; this was to be a traumatic experience in many ways and was to have grave repercussions on family life.

By eliminating the heavy manual work of launching the wooden shuttle, the mechanical loom made it possible to replace the work of the man with the cheaper labour of women and girls. What was now

<sup>27</sup> Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, vol. 1, p. 97 (Margherita Lovera).

<sup>28</sup> A. Rossi, *Dell'arte della lana in Italia e all'estero, giudicata all'Esposizione di Parigi del 1867* (Florence 1869), p. 216.

<sup>29</sup> 'Contribuzione per una statistica delle merci', in *Annali di Statistica*, 3rd series, 14 (1885), 43-5.

required of them was to reattach, precisely and swiftly, the threads which had broken under the strain of weaving. This was work which required ability and dexterity, but its only major physical prerequisites were a sharp eye and sufficient height to reach up to the looms.

In this new job, women's wages remained much lower than those of men, but were none the less greater than their average previous wage. Women's status in the factory changed too, as did their role *vis-à-vis* the men. These processes became clear in the Biellese, where mechanized looms gave work to the wives, sisters, and daughters of the male weavers, who continued to operate manually the old wooden looms. When this substitution of roles was combined with a crisis in the textile industry, the effects on the levels of male employment became clear for all to see. Social conflicts of considerable bitterness took place, with the women and girls fighting alongside their husbands, fathers, and brothers, and in so doing conquering for the first time an equal status as workers.<sup>30</sup>

Such was the pattern of events in 1878 at the Sella mill in Biella. Elsewhere in the rural centres, the old wooden loom continued to play an important role during the last decades of the century. According to the statistics of the time, 230,000 home looms were still operating at the end of the 1880s; of these at least two-thirds were being worked by women in the countryside, mostly for flax and hemp, and sometimes for cotton.<sup>31</sup> However, it was the silk mill which was to offer the women of rural Italy the most obvious and frequently taken opportunity for industrial work.

#### THE SILK MILL

The working of silk, like that of flax and hemp, was widespread in Italian rural society. It was to be found in both north and south, with the exception only of the regions of Apulia, Basilicata, and Sicily.<sup>32</sup> A few figures will give an idea of the 'veritable army of peasant women' who in the first half of the nineteenth century were mobilized every summer for three or four months at a time. For mainland Piedmont, Petitti di Roreto gave the figure of 36,535 women (as opposed to 3,000

<sup>30</sup> See F. Ramella, *Terra e telai. Sistemi di parentela e manifattura nel Biellese dell'Ottocento* (Turin 1984), pp. 251-7.

<sup>31</sup> B. Benedini, *Le piccole industrie adatte ai contadini nelle intermittenze dei lavori campestri* (Brescia 1894), p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Ellena, *La statistica*, p. 47.

men), half of whom were children. The women unwound the cocoons and the girls rotated the reel on which the threads were rewound. The normal working day was fourteen to sixteen hours long, with a break of one hour for lunch. In Lombardy for the same period, the 1840s and 1850s, the female labour force for the silk industry was estimated at 80,000 women and girls.<sup>33</sup>

The working of silk was not only the most widespread of rural industries; it was also the most important. It had been so in the pre-Unification States at the end of the eighteenth century and in the first half of the nineteenth century, and so it was in the second half of the century as well. In the late 1870s, Italy produced more raw silk than any other country in Europe, and in the world it was second only to China. The productivity of Italian workers was one-and-a-half times greater than that of their French counterparts. These were achievements which depended entirely on the quality and intensity of work done by women. 'The working of silk', admitted Vittorio Ellena, 'requires little physical force and our women, as befits this most delicate of arts, have good eyes and swift fingers. Furthermore, our poor little women accept wages which are little more than half those being paid in France'.<sup>34</sup> At the end of the seventeenth century the Piedmontese had been the first to introduce a technique which gave silk thread an extra strength and lustre, but which could only be executed by the agile fingers of women.

The unwinding of silk was the first stage in its production: the cocoons were put to steep in very hot water (70°–75° centigrade), in basins which were heated from below by small furnaces. The woman throwster took the cocoon in her hands, unwound the silk from it, and wound the thread onto a reel. When winding – and this was the Piedmontese method – she had to cross the thread over and over and twist it upon itself so as to make it stronger. The Piedmontese regulations of 1667 laid down that the number of these windings should be eight, and stipulated a daily wage rate rather than a piecework one, so as to be sure that the process was properly executed. But in nineteenth century, when the Piedmontese technique had become standard practice and the need for high levels of productivity had made piecework payment habitual, the number of twists given to the thread became the object of numerous disputes and conflicts. The more the silk

<sup>33</sup> See respectively Petitti di Roreto, *Del lavoro dei fanciulli*, p. 690 and G. Frattini, *Storia e statistica dell'industria manifatturiera in Lombardia* (Milan 1856), pp. 58–9.

<sup>34</sup> Ellena, *La statistica*, p. 43.



thread was subject to tension as it was wound, the more easily it broke. The women workers then had to re-tie it, losing both time and money as they were paid on a piecework basis.<sup>35</sup>

In the second half of the century various initiatives were taken which rendered the silk industry more firmly industrial and more efficient economically. Steam powered the movement of the reels and heated the water; in the interests of productivity the throwster was no longer required to work at the basins, and a *sbattitrice*, usually a young girl, took her place. These changes accentuated the intensity of the work process. Henceforth, the pace of the throwster's work was determined not only by the intrinsic difficulties of production, but also by the greater or lesser swiftness of the *sbattitrice* in supplying her with the thread to reel. Tempers flared between the women; the *sbattitrice*, younger than the throwster and firmly at the bottom of the factory hierarchy, could often expect to be on the receiving end of the older woman's anger. Sometimes, indeed, the *sbattitrici* were made to pay for their mistakes in brutal fashion. Lea Baravalle recalled her experience of working as a *sbattitrice* in a silk mill in the years after the First World War. If she and the others like her were not sufficiently quick in providing the thread, the throwsters 'hit us and then scooped up the boiling water and splashed it in our faces, or drenched us from head to foot... as a punishment... because they in turn had to meet the demands of production'.<sup>36</sup>

Technical innovation did not substantially modify the manual nature of the work. Both in the steam mills and the older ones with furnaces, which in any case survived for most of the nineteenth century, the *sbattitrice* and the throwster worked with bare hands in the boiling water used for steeping. As a result, of all the illnesses which afflicted the women silk workers (rheumatism, digestive difficulties, failing eyesight), that which tormented them most was the damage done to their hands.

The growth in the size of the mills in the second half of the nineteenth century led to major concentrations of women workers. This was no longer the rural industry of the first decades of the century, which most often saw women return home in the evenings and

<sup>35</sup> B. Chicco, 'L'industria della seta in Piemonte dal 1814 al 1860' (unpublished degree thesis, Università degli Studi di Torino, 1970-1), pp. 159-60.

<sup>36</sup> N. Revelli, *L'anello forte* (Turin 1985), p. 140 (Anna Giorgis). For the testimony of Lea Baravalle see B. Guidetti Serra, *Compagne. Testimonianze di partecipazione politica femminile* (2 vols., Turin 1977), vol. II, pp. 538-9.

combine work in the mill with that of the fields. The silk mills had outgrown the time when the rural stage of nurturing the cocoons determined the months of production; now the mills were open for the whole year, attracting women from a very wide radius. The 'foreigners' were given lodgings which combined the habitual poverty of a rural dwelling with the strangeness and squalor of the factory. In the 1840s one report noted that the women slept 'in ill-ventilated rooms, huddled up on the most rudimentary of bedding'. Later, dormitories were introduced, with no other furnishings than 'wooden bunk beds with mattresses made from leaves'. The women hung the sacks containing their possessions on hooks on the wall, 'and there were rats and mice which climbed over everything'<sup>37</sup>

In the second half of the century, the development of machines for the unwinding of silk, as well as the mechanization of auxiliary processes like bobbin-winding, which had previously been done at home, opened up new possibilities of factory work for rural women. At Savigliano, an important industrial centre in Piedmont, by the end of the century there were generations of women who, from infancy to old age, had performed the whole gamut of jobs inside the mill. 'When local hands were lacking and there was a lot of work to be done, then they went to call the *furestre* [the foreigners]... They came from the countryside and were over the moon at getting a factory job'.<sup>38</sup> The reason for such initial enthusiasm can be more easily understood if we glance for a moment at what were the habitual conditions of women's life in the countryside.

#### AGRICULTURE

For the whole of the nineteenth century the statistics for agriculture, in contrast to those for industry, registered a clear majority of male workers. Yet in the rural centres, where the great majority of the population was concentrated (the small cities being little more than large agricultural agglomerates), female labour in agriculture was the natural state of affairs. Domestic labour itself had strong agricultural elements. The woman supplied the household with dairy products by milking the cows or goats; with fruit and vegetables (the essential basis of working-class and peasant alimentation in Italy) by tending the

<sup>37</sup> Sacchi, 'Sul lavoro dei fanciulli', p. 242 and Guidetti Serra, *Compagne*, vol. II, pp. 537-8 (Lea Baravalle).

<sup>38</sup> Revelli, *L'anello forte*, pp. 12-13 (Margherita Lemasson).

kitchen garden; with clothes and linen, by spinning and weaving. A whole series of domestic tasks, like going to fetch water and doing the washing meant carrying considerable weights; from the Alps to Sicily, women had made a speciality of carrying weights on their heads.

Spinning and weaving, too, were intimately connected with a specific agricultural job done by women. For centuries it was their task to prepare the fibres of flax and hemp by letting the plants steep in stagnant water. In the seventeenth century this work had inspired more than one artist, but its highly unhealthy aspects did not escape the penetrating gaze of a famous early-eighteenth-century doctor, Bernardino Ramazzini. Referring to the illnesses which afflicted the peasants in the autumn, he wrote:

In this season they have the habit of letting the flax and hemp steep in stagnant waters; the women, who have the principal responsibility for this task, stand with the water up to their waists and pull the bundles of hemp out of the bogs and ponds so as to dry them. And so no few number of them, having performed so wet a task, fall prey to violent fevers and expire within a very short period of time.<sup>39</sup>

Nearly two centuries later, the job of letting the flax and hemp steep in stagnant water was still, in the Piedmontese countryside, an exclusively female task. Anna Lucia Giordanengo remembered how at the end of the last century she spun hemp with her friends in the stables of a hill village in Piedmont: 'We planted the hemp ourselves, and when it was ready we set it to steep in cold water. Then we beat the bundles so as to split them up.'<sup>40</sup>

The breeding of silkworms was also a widespread activity in peasant homes all over Italy. It provided a peasant family with its first cash of the year, before the harvest, and involved women in intense activity. It was they who had 'to put the seed of the worms to the warmth of their breasts, until the time that they were ready to hatch'. Theirs was the tiring and unrewarding task, in which they were aided by their children, of providing a constant supply of mulberry leaves to satisfy the voracious appetite of the worms, and to clean up their droppings. 'Left to look after those silk worms, what toil was that, I still dream about them even now', recalled one peasant. 'Poor women, with their

<sup>39</sup> B. Ramazzini, *Le malattie dei lavoratori (De morbis artificum diatriba, 1713)*, ed. F. Carnevale (Rome 1982), p. 174. Women extracting hemp from a macerating-vat is the subject of a painting attributed to Guercino (1591-1666), to be found in the Pinacoteca Civica of Cento; see *Il Guercino. Catalogo critico dei dipinti*, ed. Denis Mahon (Bologna 1968), n. 18E.

<sup>40</sup> Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, vol. 1, p. 84.

men leaving home early in the morning, while it was still dark, to collect the mulberry leaves, and them left at home to clean up the worms, to look after the children, the animals, everything.<sup>41</sup>

The leading role of women in the breeding conferred on them a position of authority when it was time to sell. One Piedmontese cattle merchant remembered: 'If the woman had decided to sell, we bought at a good price; but if the wife told the husband not to sell, there was nothing more to be done.' And it was the woman who went to market to sell butter and eggs, or the products of her vegetable garden.<sup>42</sup>

These tasks did not exclude women from working in the fields. A woman's role in the family was intimately linked with the agricultural work she did, alongside her husband and her sons. She would help in cultivating the peasant holding (if the family was one of renters, of share-croppers, or of *coloni*); or the small piece of land which, especially in the mountains and high hills, many peasants, even poor ones, owned.

'We had nothing', a Piedmontese peasant recalled, talking of his parents in the last decade of the nineteenth century. 'My father had rented a little farm of three *giornate*', and he and his wife worked it together.

They cultivated it all by hoe, they hoed even at night time, the only animal they had was a sow. My father and mother went to work in the fields, taking me with them like a little bundle, which they deposited under a mulberry tree. They dragged along the board with which to level the earth, my mother in front and my father behind with a rope, and once they got the ground level they began to sow the grain.<sup>43</sup>

In some forms of fixed labouring contracts, cash payments were accompanied by a home and a small piece of land, as well as gleaning rights for the rice and corn. In these cases the physical division of labour between husband and wife was quite clear. It was the wife who cultivated the small piece of land and did the gleaning, and in so doing 'gained by her labour half of the family's daily bread'.<sup>44</sup>

The questionnaire prepared by Agostino Bertani in 1878 for his 'study of the hygienic, sanitary, civil and economic conditions of agricultural workers in Italy', contained two key questions relating to the condition of women in the countryside. The first asked 'if women are accustomed to work in the fields and carry weights in ways which

<sup>41</sup> See Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti*, vol. 1, respectively on pp. 52 (Teresa Bertolino) and 14 (Giovanni Forzano). <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94 (Bartolomeo Spada) and 34 (Caterina Toselli).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37 (Giuseppe Daniele).

<sup>44</sup> G. Gramegna, 'Delle risaie e della loro influenza sull'umana salute' (1852), in L. Faccini, *Uomini e lavoro in risaia* (Milan 1976), pp. 196-202 (quotation from p. 197).

damage their health and physical development'. The replies of doctors from a great many of the provinces of Italy confirmed that women were frequently asked 'to do the same work as men, without any regard to the special conditions of menstruation, pregnancy and confinement'.<sup>45</sup> Bertani's second question, namely 'if women and children work at home with their own family, or if they work for wages away from their homes', focused on another and no less grave chapter of rural suffering.

A commune rich in manufacturing like that of Monza, close to Milan, denied the serious dimensions of the problem, which was limited to 'very poor and numerous families with an excess of hands'. However, in other provinces not far from Monza, like Cremona, Mantua, and Pavia, and in the lower half of the province of Milan itself, the list of rural wage labourers compiled over four decades (from 1847 to 1874) registered the agricultural wage labour of women as habitual.<sup>46</sup>

If we listen again to the testimony of Lea Baravalle, we can understand better why working outside one's own home was a particularly harsh fate and the object of a specific question in Bertani's inquest. Baravalle belonged to a family of 'extremely poor rural wage labourers' in the province of Cuneo in Piedmont. In the last decades of the nineteenth century her grandfather had been a labourer and *cap d'om* (an organizer of the labourers of his village). Both her mother and father were labourers, too, at the turn of the century, and Lea herself followed her mother's example at the end of the 1920s:

In my part of the country we went to Saluzzo because there was a big cattle market. In the piazza, on one side there were the animals and on the other there were those of us who were looking for work. My mother had gone there too, when she was young... The peasant proprietors came down from all the valleys specially to look for men and women... They looked in your mouth to see if you had healthy or decayed teeth, because if you had healthy teeth it meant that you'd eat more; and if they were decayed, then you'd eat less.<sup>47</sup>

When Lea Baravalle was in the market square they looked at the

<sup>45</sup> Agostino Bertani's questionnaire, with the replies of the municipal doctor of Monza, is published in S. Zaninelli, *Storia di Monza e della Brianza. Vita economica e sociale* (Milan 1969), pp. 277-95. For the questions and replies referred to in the text, see p. 291. A collection of the doctors' replies organized by subject-matter is to be found in M. Panizza, *Risultati dell'inchiesta istituita da Agostino Bertani sulle condizioni sanitarie dei lavoratori della terra in Italia. Riassunto e considerazioni* (Rome 1890); the quotation in the text is on p. 381. The troubled history of the questionnaire, and of the enquiry which Bertani wished to counterpose to that of Jacini is recounted in A. Caracciolo, *L'inchiesta agraria Jacini* (Turin 1973).

<sup>46</sup> 'Notizie sui salari raccolte dal prof. Rota', in *Annali di Statistica*, 3rd series, 14 (1885), 6-7.

<sup>47</sup> For the testimony of Lea Baravalle see Guidetti Serra, *Compagne*, vol. II, pp. 536 and 540-1.

knuckles of her fingers to see if she knew how to milk cows; and after that they inspected her teeth. At this point so great was her anger and indignation that she turned on her heel and fled from the piazza.

The destiny from which she had fled, seeking refuge as a servant girl in the city, was a widespread reality in the Italian countryside in the nineteenth century. It was not limited to families of labourers, but affected in a more general way – as the commune of Monza pointed out – ‘very poor and numerous families’, namely of small proprietors, share-croppers, and other kinds of tenants.

The importance of women and children as rural labourers actually increased in the course of the century. This was because of the steady spread in the irrigated plains of Piedmont and Lombardy of rice growing, which had first been introduced into Italy at the end of the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century one observer thought it worthy of note that the growing of rice ‘gives work ... to women and even children of eight and ten years of age’.<sup>48</sup> In the second half of the century it was above all women and older children who were mobilized for work in the rice fields, sometimes moving considerable distances from one region to another. They spent April and May in sowing, their feet immersed in water, working the fields with hoes or shovels in a constant and rhythmic motion. In June and July, when it was important to rid the furrows of weeds which threatened the growth of the rice shoots, they worked under a scorching sun, with their feet and legs immersed in the muddy water.

The hours of work in the rice fields were governed by the rising and setting of the sun. A law of 1866 had sought to limit the working-day of the *mondine* (the women rice workers), stipulating that ‘work was not to begin until one hour after dawn and had to cease one hour before sunset’. However, even as late as the start of the new century the law was widely ignored.<sup>49</sup>

Work conditions in the rice fields evoked a vast literature of protest. Deaths caused by malaria in the rice-growing regions, like the other illnesses which afflicted labouring men and women, were only the terrible culmination of their suffering and deprivation. In the Italian countryside deaths at childbirth remained at a high level because of the lack of midwives, and the alarming rate of infant mortality was in part

<sup>48</sup> See L. Dal Pane, *Economia e società a Bologna nell'età del Risorgimento* (Bologna 1969), p. 96.

<sup>49</sup> *Memoriale sul lavoro nelle risaie presentato alle LL.EE. al Ministro dell'Interno ed al Ministro di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio dalle Associazioni Agrarie di Novara e Vercelli* (Novara 1903), p. 6.

due also to the wet nursing system, which forced peasant women to breast feed their own baby and that of another woman at the same time.

In the variety of circumstances which could force a woman to rely only on her own endeavour for the necessities of life (such as the death of her husband, or war-time conditions), the case of seasonal migration has a place all of its own. For centuries migration had been a habitual cycle in peasant life, and in the poorest regions had helped to maintain a precarious social equilibrium.

In the winter, when the women were most busy with weaving, spinning, or knitting, the men set off on their travels, following patterns of emigration established over the centuries. From the poor Apennine regions of Tuscany and the Marches, they went down into the plains of Tuscany, Lazio, and Campania; from the Alps they crossed into northern Europe. They were mostly poor peasants, forced to migrate by strict necessity, but there were also shepherds and artisans. Their itineraries changed little from the beginning of the eighteenth century through to the second half of the nineteenth. They were away from home during the winter and the spring; sometimes they even stayed in the plains for the early part of the summer, since in their own mountain valleys the season was less far advanced. By harvest-time, though, they would all be back home.<sup>50</sup>

However, with the increase in the middle of the century of railway construction and public works, the men began to work away from home as labourers, bricklayers, and brickmakers. This meant that they were often not at home in the summer as well, which was of course the busiest time in the agricultural calendar; all the rural work now fell upon the woman's shoulders. It reinforced in her a physical resistance, which was not only typical of the Alpine regions or the Marches, but in general of all the poorer areas where seasonal migration was a widespread phenomenon.

Linked to seasonal migration was also the custom of using female labour in local public-works projects. Such a practice was already common in the first half of the century, in very poor provinces of the north like Sondrio and Bergamo,<sup>51</sup> and it became more so in the following decades, with the increase in migration all over the peninsula.

<sup>50</sup> See for example, Dal Pane, *Storia del lavoro*, pp. 250-2, 482 and 486, and *Industria e Commercio*, vol. II, p. 79; F. Bonelli, *Evoluzione demografica ed ambiente economico nelle Marche e nell'Umbria dell'Ottocento* (Turin 1967), pp. 143-5; H. Desplanques, *Campagnes Ombriennes* (Paris 1969), pp. 514-16.

<sup>51</sup> 'Notizie sui salari raccolte dal prof. P. Rota', in *Annali di Statistica*, 3rd series, 14 (1885), 23.

In the 1880s in Friuli, in the extreme northeast, young women described as 'day labourers' or 'rural workers' themselves began to take the path of temporary emigration. They accompanied their husbands, parents, or brothers, to work in the kilns, where they carried bricks and mortar; or else they cooked and washed for the groups of emigrants.<sup>52</sup> Another consistent group of young women escaped from rural labouring altogether by choosing the path which led them into the cities, and the jobs of domestic servants, wet nurses, and nannies.

#### WORK IN THE CITIES

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the steady expansion of the textile industries in the countryside had left to the cities the difficult and ancient art of silk weaving. Plain and worked silk cloth, velvet and satin, ribbons and silk umbrellas, braids, fringes and lace, all were destined for the homes and wardrobes of the aristocracy and the well-to-do. Their production was concentrated in the major cities and was to a great extent carried out by women working at home.

In the Napoleonic era at Bologna some 4,000 women had found employment making veils,<sup>53</sup> but two decades later, with the concentration and contraction of the market, their numbers had dwindled. None the less the predominance of female labour in this sector had been maintained or even perhaps increased. In 1824, 760 women out of a total of 921 workers (of whom 83 were children) were employed by the seven largest Bologna veil 'factories' (the term was used not to describe a specific building containing all the looms but rather the putting-out system controlled by a single merchant). Domestic chores severely limited the productivity of these women. It was reported that while men earned on an average 20 to 30 *baiocchi* per day, women (whose rate of pay was half that of men), earned only 4-6 *baiocchi*, since 'they lost much time in household duties'.<sup>54</sup>

In Florence, working at the loom to make silk cloth was, in the first half of the century, an exclusively female occupation. Apart from one or two men, the whole workforce of 1,800 was female, and their conditions of life were appalling. Belonging to the poorest stratum of

<sup>52</sup> G. Cosattini, *L'emigrazione temporanea del Friuli* (1903), facsimile republication edn by the Direzione regionale del lavoro del Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trieste-Udine (1983), pp. 37-8.

<sup>53</sup> 'Prospetto riassuntivo delle fabbriche e manifatture esistenti (1809)', in L. Dal Pane, *Economia e società a Bologna nell'età del Risorgimento* (Bologna 1969), p. 273.

<sup>54</sup> Relazione statistica della Camera di Commercio di Bologna (1824), quoted in Dal Pane, *Economia e società a Bologna*, p. 231.



the population, they usually lived in one room which contained bed, loom, and fireplace.<sup>55</sup>

At Milan, according to statistics of 1833, men and women were roughly equal in number in the principal silk manufactories of the city. The same local statistics also recorded a great number of women engaged in the type-foundries or busy in a whole series of artisanal crafts: in making jewels, umbrellas, and hats as well as decorative fringes and galloons, in working coral and sealing-wax, morocco and leather gloves.<sup>56</sup>

Work done at home was thus the principal female employment in the cities, with its part-time character and its overtones of oppressiveness, due, amongst other things, to the very restricted size of working-class living quarters. It was significant that this was one of the principal motives which led men to abhor working at the loom. They preferred instead, even if it meant being much less well paid, jobs as 'errand-boys in a haberdashers' shop'. Equally significant was that young women also sought to escape from the servitude of the loom, which bound them to 'the sad and wretched habitation'. They too chose to be 'assistants in dressmaker's shops' for a few *paoli* per week rather than to earn four or five *paoli* per day as weavers.<sup>57</sup>

By the 1840s it was already clear that work at the loom was being replaced by sewing as the principal female occupation in the major cities. This marked a significant change both in the hierarchy of different types of women's work and in the division of labour between men and women. In this context, the Tuscan census of 1840 suggests a number of conclusions. At Florence, where working at the loom was so exclusively a female occupation, by 1840 female weavers had become a small minority compared to the great number of seamstresses and needlewomen. Concurrently, the number of (male) tailors had also dwindled in comparison to their female counterparts. In Napoleonic times, by contrast, tailoring along with carpentry and umbrella making

<sup>55</sup> G. C. Vanni, 'Cenni sul commercio della seta in Toscana, e sui mezzi di aumentarlo', *Continuazione degli Atti dell'I. e R. Accademia economico-agraria dei Georgofili di Firenze*, 9 (1831), 7-21 (quotation from p. 15). A tradition which was already dominant in the Napoleonic era was perpetuated in this way; see S. J. Woolf, 'The domestic economy of the poor in Florence in the early nineteenth century', in *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome*, 99 (1987), pp. 901-15, table 3 on p. 911.

<sup>56</sup> See respectively: 'Prospetto statistico dello Stato delle manifatture e fabbriche in actualità di esercizio nella città di Milano nell'anno 1833', in M. Romani, 'L'economia milanese nell'età della Restaurazione', in *Storia di Milano*, vol. XIV (Milan 1960), pp. 675-742, pp. 702-3; L. Sabbatini, *Notizie sulle condizioni industriali della provincia di Milano*, *Annali di statistica*, 44 (1893), 375; Maestri, *L'Italia economica nel 1868*, p. 207.

<sup>57</sup> Vanni, *Cenni sul commercio della seta*, pp. 14-15.

had been considered among the trades to be taught to boys, while girls learned to spin and weave.<sup>58</sup>

By 1840 the number of seamstresses in Florence and the other urban centres of Tuscany was almost equal to that of female servants. This was another significant statistic, if we bear in mind that 'going into service' traditionally constituted one of the most important forms of employment for the women from the lower classes, and if we remember that most of the seamstresses were only between fifteen and twenty-five years of age.<sup>59</sup> It is more than possible that working-class girls were going to work in tailors' shops not just to escape from the servitude of the loom and their cramped living conditions, but also to avoid domestic service, which certainly took them away from their poor and barren homes but only at the price of humiliating personal subordination.

In Rome at the same period the sort of domestic service which involved living in the employer's home was usually performed only by single girls who had recently emigrated to the city.<sup>60</sup> Lacking a home, family, or kin in the city, they saw this sort of work as a possible solution to the problems of lodging, employment, and, quite often, personal safety. But those women who had a roof over their heads, who were wives or daughters in a family of their own, and who had a network of acquaintances in a popular quarter of the city, chose only to work as domestic servants for certain hours during the day. In so doing, they preserved their own autonomy and privacy, and could combine or alternate domestic service with other activities. When combined with subletting a room (or even a bed), domestic service could not only assure survival but even sometimes a relatively tranquil existence.

Sewing and needlework also appealed to the many Roman women who, lacking steady work or a training, had accepted service in other people's homes. The choice was in no way connected to better wages. A woman who once 'had lived comfortably and had put aside a bit of money' as long as she lived as a domestic servant 'in the house of her

<sup>58</sup> S. J. Woolf, 'The treatment of the poor in Napoleonic Tuscany', in *Annuario dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per l'Età Moderna e Contemporanea*, vols. xxiii-xxiv (1971-2), pp. 435-74 (quotation from p. 449).

<sup>59</sup> Bandettini, *La popolazione della Toscana*, pp. 119 and 68. In Florence seamstresses and domestic servants represented, respectively, 14.06 per cent and 12.71 per cent of the female population; in the other Tuscan urban centres, 7.94 per cent and 8.64 per cent.

<sup>60</sup> For the situation in Rome, see M. Pelaja, 'Mestieri femminili e luoghi comuni. Le domestiche a Roma a metà Ottocento', *Quaderni Storici*, 68 (1988), 497-518. The quotations in the text are from pp. 500-1.

employees', was hardly able to 'make ends meet' once she started working as a seamstress for 'various tailors' shops'.

The general scarcity of productive jobs for women in the urban centres of Italy was relieved in some cities by a type of manufacturing work which was traditionally reserved for women, namely that of making cigars from tobacco. This was an industry which predated Unification, and which was tied to manual methods of production throughout the nineteenth century.

Both the pre-Unification States and the Italian one exercised a monopoly over tobacco. In 1861 there were about twenty factories, mostly in the north and centre of the country, all with a predominantly female workforce. In 1880 there were 13,707 women employed in the industry as against 1,947 men. The Italian state had encouraged a tradition in the industry by which mothers could hand on their jobs to their daughters if they so wished.<sup>61</sup>

The women did various jobs in the factory, including the most important one, that of actually making the cigars. They sat on high wooden stools, which must have been quite uncomfortable since the management of the factory at Lucca allowed its workers to 'bring a cushion of their own'. Workers were either grouped around long tables or else sat in twos at smaller ones with marble tops. Once the filling of the cigar was ready (and at Modena this consisted simply of a small amount of tobacco taken from an apron pocket), the worker cut a large slice of tobacco leaf, coated it with glue, put the filling inside, and wrapped it up. The cigar was now ready and all that remained to be done was to use a measuring stick and cut the cigar to the right length.<sup>62</sup>

Piecework was the norm in the cigar factories: at Lucca about 500 *sigariste* produced 700 kilos of cigars per day. In the winter the working day lasted from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon (with one hour for lunch at 11.30 a.m.). In the summer, work began at 7 a.m. and finished at eleven at night, with one and half hours in the middle of the day 'to lunch or to go and eat at their homes'.<sup>63</sup>

Work discipline was reinforced and made more odious by its being linked with repressive moral control, which was exercised over the workers not as workers but as women. At Modena the documents of

<sup>61</sup> See Ellena, *La statistica*, p. 123; Fano, *Della carità preventiva*, p. 219; P. Nava, 'Storie di vita e di lavoro. Le operaie della Manifattura Tabacchi di Modena', *Memoria*, no. 3 (1982), 99-107 (for a more detailed treatment by the same author, see *La fabbrica dell'emancipazione. Operaie della manifattura tabacchi di Modena: Storia di vita e di lavoro*, Rome 1986).

<sup>62</sup> See *Cenni sul tabacco e dei modi di sua manifattura nella R. Azienda di Lucca* (Lucca 1862), pp. 43-4 and Nava, 'Storie di vita e di lavoro', p. 102.

<sup>63</sup> *Cenni sul tabacco*, pp. 66-7.

the cigar factory archive have revealed that the managing director was in direct contact with the police, the *carabinieri*, and the local magistrate's court. Anonymous letters, or those written by foremen, denounced 'the immoral behaviour inside and outside the factory' of this or that female worker.<sup>64</sup>

Yet the principal problem for the women cigar workers in the decades after Unification was not the very low wages, nor the long hours of work, nor even the employers' surveillance. The real calamity for these women was rather one which came not just from the factory but from the social context in which they lived, and which killed off many of them while they were still young: tuberculosis.

The personal records of 1,100 female workers kept in the Modenese archive referred to above and which cover a period from 1861 to the First World War, have revealed the horrific reality of hundreds and hundreds of young women who died from tuberculosis. Even an exclusively technical and economic report like that of 1861 from the Lucca factory could not ignore the reality of 'daily illnesses' with their consequent absences amongst the workforce, and especially amongst the cigar makers. Some women in Modena, as Nava has written, 'had tuberculosis in the family already, and they brought it with them to the cigar factory, or else they contracted the disease there, working every day shoulder-to-shoulder, on those stools all in a line'.<sup>65</sup>

This grave health problem conditioned the interpersonal relations amongst the women workers; on some occasions diffidence and hostility triumphed, with the management being informed when a sick woman tried to hide her illness; on others, solidarity and affection won the day, with collections being made to help those whom the illness had forced to give up work. Indeed, the two attitudes were not necessarily incompatible.

By the end of the nineteenth century major changes were taking place in the nature of women's work in the cities. A great number of them were drawn into industrialization through the changes realized in the ancient art of sewing and needlework. The sewing-machine transformed this sector, and in centres like Milan women workers became involved in industrial production in the modern sense.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Nava, 'Storie di vita e di lavoro', p. 103.

<sup>65</sup> At Lucca 'daily illnesses' were reported both in the department of *spulardaggio*, where the leaves were cleaned and selected, and in that where the cigars were made (*Cenni sul tabacco*, pp. 27 and 40). For Modena see Nava, 'Storie di vita e di lavoro', p. 104.

<sup>66</sup> In 1868 Enrico Fano noted, in relation to the 'revolution' brought about by sewing-machines 'in the habits and customs of women', that none the less half of them were still 'armed with needles and thimble', and gained their living in that way (*Della carità preventiva*, p. 221). By 1880 Vittorio Ellena was emphasizing the great utility of the machines, and the transformation

Sewing-machines were widely used by women workers for the first time in the 1870s. Their introduction left unchanged the traditional organization of work, but naturally raised expectations in terms of productivity, and contributed to increasing the hours of work, stress, and exhaustion.

These transformations were most evident in Milan amongst the women workers in the shoe and leather industry. This sector had developed rapidly in the 1870s, combining factory work with the putting-out system. Around a series of large factories gravitated a whole constellation of houses and tiny workshops where women laboured at hemming and at putting the finishing touches to bags, shoes, suitcases, and other leather goods.<sup>67</sup> Some of the details of this way of life have come down to us thanks to an enquiry carried out by Luigi Carozzi, an eminent scholar of medical problems active in the first years of the twentieth century.<sup>68</sup> It brought to light health and working conditions which had developed over a long period of time, and to a great extent were typical of all.

As far back as the first half of the nineteenth century the sewers of gloves in Milan constituted an important category of female industrial workers: the statistics of 1833 noted the 'very large number of women employed by leather firms to make gloves of every sort'. With the introduction of a sewing-machine for family use, which was adapted in various secondary ways from the original industrial model, the productivity of work increased enormously.

In the 1880s, according to technical experts, the sewing-machine for gloves enabled a woman worker to make between fifteen and twenty pairs per day. But in Milan, at the time of Carozzi's survey, a worker only managed to produce at most fourteen pairs, and that after a twelve-to-fourteen-hours' day. Indeed, a series of tasks had to be added to the sewing work pure and simple, which by itself took some thirty-five minutes: repairing eventual faults (just a few wrong stitches meant beginning all over again), finishing off by stitching and reinforcing the sewings (prior to that, the women workers licked the gloves, because this was said to ensure that the needle entered the leather better). In addition, they frequently had to stop the machines to look after their

that they had brought about in work done at home (*La statistica*, p. 103). See also the entry, 'macchina da cucire', by A. Galassini in the *Enciclopedia delle Arti e Industrie*, eds. R. Pareto and G. Sacheri (Turin 1885), vol. v, pt. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Sabbatini, *Notizie sulle condizioni industriali della provincia di Milano*, pp. 318-19, 343-6, 380-1.

<sup>68</sup> L. Carozzi, 'Il lavoro a domicilio delle guantaie', *Il Lavoro*, 3 (1906), 1-27.

young children and do household chores. Often, too, they had to stop because of pains in their legs or shoulders. The only solution, then, was to go on working for twelve to fourteen hours a day.<sup>69</sup>

In this way the Milanese gloveworkers worked far into the night. Even in the daytime their work was done in very unhealthy conditions, in rooms which lacked air or light, in the porters' lodges on the ground floor of the residential buildings of the old city, or else in rooms which had to serve as kitchen, work room, dining room and often bedroom all in one. The hours of sleep which they lost increased the stress and exhaustion in constitutions which already suffered from the 'organic denutrition' typical of the working classes. Many of the glovemakers admitted that they took to drinking in order 'to find the energy to get to the end of the working day'.

The glovemakers, and needlewomen in general, suffered from chronic pains in their legs, shoulders, and backs, caused by the many hours they spent bent over their machines. The sewing machine for gloves had a particular drawback. To allow the leather for the glove to be fed slowly under the needle without causing it to ruck, the machine was fitted with a third pedal in addition to the two standard ones. The need to use this pedal forced the worker into a contorted position, with all her weight concentrated on one side of her body.

However, the most dramatic health problem for the glovemakers as for the cigar workers was that of the high incidence of tuberculosis, with the terrible toll that it took of young women workers. The situation at the end of the nineteenth century was almost certainly as dramatic as that described by Luigi Carozzi a few years later.<sup>70</sup> The spread of the disease was favoured by working conditions which, by accentuating tiredness and stress, diminished the defence mechanisms of the worker's body.

The world of the glovemaker had many similarities with the social reality prevailing in other occupations in the major cities, of women labouring within the narrow confines of their own homes, making tassels, fringes, and lace trimmings, constructing boxes or binding books, all of which barely sufficed to give them enough to live on. It

<sup>69</sup> The sewing-machine for gloves described in the *Enciclopedia* of 1885 (pp. 674-82) was the same machine which Carozzi described as being used by the Milanese glovemakers at the beginning of the twentieth century ('Il lavoro a domicilio della guantaie', pp. 5-7).

<sup>70</sup> See Carozzi, 'Il lavoro a domicilio delle guantaie', pp. 8-18. In 1904, for example, tuberculosis was responsible for 40.69 per cent of deaths amongst the needlewomen, and of 72.73 per cent (p. 15) of those amongst glovemakers. Carozzi underlined that there were no cases of there having been a history of the disease in the families.

was a reality largely ignored by statisticians as well as by politicians: the law of 1902 for 'the safeguarding of the conditions of work of women and children' represented only the first steps towards the recognition of the rights of working women.

#### SOCIAL INFERIORITY

Women's subordination was a general condition in Italy as elsewhere, affecting all social classes and enshrined by law. The institution of *maritalis auctoritas*, for example, which made a wife dependent upon her husband in a whole series of juridical and patrimonial ways, was abolished only in 1919. In the rural and urban working class, where women were involved from childhood onwards in productive activity, a woman's subordination was in strident contrast with the substantially equal role that she played in supporting the family. Young working-class women sometimes had a certain financial autonomy as well. In Piedmont a councillor of state noted in 1834 that the girls who worked in the silk mills not only could put aside some of their wages for their dowry, but also earned notoriety as 'young girls on the look out for husbands', 'with money of their own', 'ready to make good marriages'.<sup>71</sup>

Women's social inferiority, which existed in all sections of the population and often assumed the most odious of forms amongst the working classes, had its origins in the society of the *ancien régime*. Although demands for women's equality had not been absent from the Italian Enlightenment, they were reinforced by the revolutionary wave which reached Italy from France at the time of the Jacobin Republics. Some women proudly declared their equality with, and even their superiority to men and 'the right to have a say in all public affairs'.<sup>72</sup> However, these were always an intellectual elite, nor did the historical conditions exist in Italy at that time which would have allowed women workers and peasants to contribute to the battle for emancipation. As a result, their lives were destined to be the same as those of their mothers and of the generations which had preceded them.

Discrimination against women began at the level of education. In the highly civilized region of Lombardy, an enquiry of 1840 revealed that of

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Chicco, 'L'industria della seta', p. 209.

<sup>72</sup> 'La causa delle donne. Discorso agl'Italiani della cittadina \*\*\*' (1797), in D. Cantimori and R. De Felice (eds), *Giacobini italiani*, vol. II (Bari 1964), pp. 455-64 (quotations from pp. 456 and 462). On the eighteenth-century debate see E. Rodocanachi, *La Femme italienne avant, pendant et après la Renaissance* (Paris 1922), pp. 45-6.

127,900 children who had not completed compulsory primary school, a good two-thirds were girls.<sup>73</sup> In every Italian region it was common for the percentage of illiteracy among women to be constantly higher than amongst men.

In adult life, one of the most constant discriminations against women was their low level of wages. In agricultural as in industrial work, in work done at home as well as that in the factory, women regularly received half the wages of men for doing the same jobs. This ratio remained constant over many decades, in different sorts of jobs and, as Petitti di Roreto noted, over a whole geographical area, which included not only Italy but France, Switzerland, and the Rhineland as well.<sup>74</sup> It testified to the presence of customs and attitudes which went very far back in time.

However, there were no limitations to the range of women's work. In the words of Giuseppe Civelli, 'women can be seen wielding the hammer of the blacksmith with the same force as a man, riding and guiding horses and then moving on to needlework with the greatest of ease; they are used to carrying heavy weights and to the most backbreaking work in agriculture and in the workshop'.<sup>75</sup>

The variety of women's work was indeed unending. In the quarries of Liguria they carried the slabs of alabaster and of slate, and in the Sicilian sulphur mines they ended their days with grave physical deformities as a result of carrying the *calcaroni*, the great blocks of mineral from which the sulphur was extracted. In the Sardinian mines they were given the task of washing the minerals that had been extracted. Women, too, were at work as navvies on the roads and railways, in northern and central Italy as well as in Naples and in Calabria. In Tuscany a great many women worked in highly unhealthy industries like matchmaking, porcelain, and glass, without the slightest precautions being taken in the event of their being pregnant.<sup>76</sup>

None the less the discriminations against women in terms of work and pay meant that if they were alone it was all too easy for them to

<sup>73</sup> Sacchi, 'Sullo Stato dei fanciulli', pp. 241-2.

<sup>74</sup> Petitti di Roreto, 'Del lavoro dei fanciulli', p. 604. See also Woolf, 'The domestic economy of the poor', pp. 908-9. This ratio was not substantially modified in the second half of the century.

<sup>75</sup> G. Civelli, 'Risposta all'interrogatorio formulato dalla Commissione consultiva sugli istituti di previdenza e del lavoro presso il Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio', in *Ricerche sopra la condizione degli operai nelle fabbriche, Annali del Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio*, 103 (1877). Attached document A, pp. 117-20 (quotation from p. 117).

<sup>76</sup> *Ricerche sopra la condizione degli operai*, pp. 5, 8, 38 (Liguria), 93 (Sardinia), 130 (Tuscany), 141 (Naples).



slip from poverty into indigence. Women were the principal targets of nineteenth-century charity, both public and private. Amongst the lists of the welfare institutions in the Italian cities in the middle of the nineteenth century, those dedicated to single women reoccur with obsessive monotony: there were those for 'imperilled women and girls', 'corrupted girls', 'repentant women', 'converted women' etc.<sup>77</sup>

Lacking any material resources, single women took to prostitution as a matter of course. They were the *zitelle*, single women who needed a dowry in order to marry, or at least some sort of work in order to live; and also widows, whose indigence was an ever-present feature of urban society.

Factory work forced the working day of a married woman well beyond the number of hours customary in the different trades. As an observer stressed in the first half of the century, the working day of women employed in unwinding the silk was far from over when they left the mill in the evening. Many had

more or less lengthy walks in order to arrive home; all of them, because they had to abandon their homes and children during the day have to provide for their children's immediate needs and for those of the morrow, as well as to put their homes in good order. For all this several hours of labour are indispensable, with the consequence that for some women the hours of repose are reduced to five or six.<sup>78</sup>

It was usual, however, that a married woman with small children, who had no mother or other relatives to help her, gave up work in the factory, and chose to work at home. This was why female employment was looked on with diffidence. As Vittorio Ellena pointed out, 'it was the source of many problems. When a woman sets up home, either she abandons the factory or she works there irregularly'.<sup>79</sup>

Further evidence of the long-standing discrimination against women can be found in the very limited participation of women in the development of professional associations. At the end of 1862, the mutual-aid societies, which at that time were the principal expression of workers' self-defence had only 10,198 women members as against 101,208 men.<sup>80</sup> Still more significant was the diffidence with which male workers greeted women's participation in workers' associations. Under the 'objective' pretexts which were used to justify their

<sup>77</sup> C. Bianchi, *Geografia politica dell'Italia* (Florence 1843; see for example, pp. 732, 735, 806-08, 935-37).

<sup>78</sup> Melchiori, 'Osservazioni igieniche sulla trattura della seta in Novi' (1845), quoted in Chicco, 'L'industria della seta', pp. 210-13.

<sup>79</sup> Ellena, *La statistica*, p. 33.

<sup>80</sup> Maestri, *L'Italia economica*, p. 175 and Fano, *Della carità preventiva*, pp. 224-5.

hostility – the scantiness of women's work or their propensity to illness<sup>81</sup> – lay an ancient spirit of corporatism, which sought at all costs to defend men's jobs from female competition. In 1879 the Milanese Chamber of Labour reported: 'In this year as well in the Milan district we have had cause to deplore more than one strike called by men workers who had the intention of forcing the factory owners not to take on apprentices or female labour.'<sup>82</sup>

Women's economic equality, indeed, was inseparable from their emancipation at the level of political rights and of family and marital relations. Underneath male hostility to women being taken on in the factories and doing the same work for the same pay lay a more profound fear, that of the calling into question of male dominance in the family.

These were problems which the nascent socialist movement had to confront; at the end of the century it assumed the mantle of women's emancipation as part of that of the working class. In the valleys surrounding Biella, generations and generations of worker-peasants had lived by cultivating their small holdings and as domestic weavers of wool. In the course of the century workers' attitudes were profoundly transformed both by the changes in the productive system (the introduction of spinning, weaving machines, the passage from working at home to work in the factory, the growth of women and children's labour), and by the introduction of socialist ideas. By the end of the century workers' attitudes to the employers had altered radically: so too had those of their sons who had freed themselves, at least in part, from overriding paternal authority, and no longer gave all their wages to the family but only a clearly stipulated part of them. But no such transformations had occurred in the Biellese in workers' attitudes to their wives. 'You must', exhorted the local social newspaper, the *Corriere Biellese*, 'respect your womenfolk and make them respected: you must not be ashamed to be in their company and to help them when you can and when they have need of it.'<sup>83</sup>

It was the turn of the century. Only the First World War, with its profound transformations and its unprecedented demands upon women would create the conditions for a substantial step forward in the cause of female emancipation.

<sup>81</sup> Fano, *Della carità preventiva*, p. 201.

<sup>82</sup> E. Friedländer, *Il lavoro delle donne e dei fanciulli* (Rome 1886), p. 128.

<sup>83</sup> The 'Corriere Biellese' of 24 November 1900 is quoted in S. Merli, *Proletariato di fabbrica e capitalismo industriale. Il caso italiano (1880-1900)* (Florence 1972), p. 846.