

## Tracing the Roots of the Civic Community

OUR INQUIRY into the performance of Italian regional governments in the 1970s and 1980s has pinpointed the unique character of civic life in some regions. Following that thread now draws us deep into the contrasting pasts of Italy's regions. Our story begins with a momentous time of transition on the Italian peninsula nearly a thousand years ago, as Italians were emerging from that obscure era justly termed the Dark Ages. Early medieval Italy, when our story opens, was closer to ancient Rome than to our own times, not only chronologically but also in everyday ways of life. Nevertheless, social patterns plainly traceable from early medieval Italy to today turn out to be decisive in explaining why, on the verge of the twenty-first century, some communities are better able than others to manage collective life and sustain effective institutions.<sup>1</sup>

### THE CIVIC LEGACIES OF MEDIEVAL ITALY

Although the regional governments were established in 1970 against the backdrop of a national administration that had been highly centralized for a hundred years, the regions themselves had far deeper historical roots. For a millennium and a half, from the fall of Rome until the middle of the nineteenth century, Italy was, in the dismissive words of the Austrian statesman Metternich, merely "a geographical expression," a congeries of many small city-states and semi-colonial dominions of foreign empires. In a world of modernizing European nation states, this fragmentation condemned Italians to economic backwardness and political marginality.

It had not always been so. In the medieval period, Italians had created political structures more advanced than any other in Christendom. Indeed, two strikingly distinctive political regimes, both innovative and both destined to have far-reaching social, economic, and political consequences, appeared around 1100 in separate parts of the peninsula:

Throughout the peninsula during the eleventh century, the time-honoured imperial system of government—Byzantine in the south, German in the north—passed through a time of strain and weakness, ending in virtual collapse, which handed the initiative to local forces. In the south the breakdown of the central government was relatively short-lived and a powerful Norman

kingdom built upon Byzantine and Arab foundations emerged; in the north, on the other hand, the attempts to revive imperial power all ended in failure and local particularism triumphed all but completely. It was in this region, stretching from Rome to the Alps, that the characteristic Italian society of the Middle Ages was free to evolve most fully; here the communes became in effect city-states, so that the area may be conveniently described as communal Italy.<sup>2</sup>

The new regime in the South, founded by Norman mercenaries from northern Europe and centered in Sicily, was singularly advanced, both administratively and economically. "The great Norman ruler, Roger II, who united Sicily, Apulia, and Calabria in 1130, retained the institutions of his Byzantine and Muslim predecessors, particularly their efficient system of taxation."<sup>3</sup> After a period of turbulence, his successor Frederick II re-established his dominion over all Italy south of the emerging Papal States and imposed an enlightened and widely admired "blend of Greek bureaucracy and Norman feudalism, but more fully integrated into a united state than it had been under his predecessors."<sup>4</sup> In 1231 Frederick issued a new constitution, which included the first codification of administrative law in Europe in seven centuries and foreshadowed many of the principles of the centralized, autocratic state that would later spread across the continent. Frederick's *Constitutiones* represented the monarchy's assertion of a monopoly over the provision of justice and public order, as well as an emphatic endorsement of the privileges of the feudal nobility.<sup>5</sup> In a Hobbesian world of widespread violence and anarchy, as afflicted all of Europe in the early Middle Ages, the imposition of social order was the supreme issue of governance.

Quite remarkably for the times, the Norman kingdom practiced religious toleration and gave freedom of worship to Moslems and Jews. Norman kings patronized an extraordinary flowering of Greek, Arabic, Jewish, Latin, and Italian vernacular arts, architecture, and learning so renowned that from Roger II to Frederick II the court was sometimes termed "a republic of scholars." In 1224 Frederick founded at Naples the first state university in Europe, where candidates were trained for the civil service he had elaborated, building on the foundations laid by Roger in the previous century. "At its zenith Norman Sicily had possessed the most highly developed bureaucracy of any western kingdom."<sup>6</sup>

Economically, the kingdom boasted several flourishing commercial towns, including Palermo, Amalfi, and Naples, Messina, Bari, and Salerno. Frederick enlarged their harbors and established a navy and merchant fleet, although (true to his autocratic mission) he insisted on state monopolies of much of the kingdom's commerce, a policy which would not serve the realm well in the future. A bold soldier-diplomat, a talented

ornithologist, a gifted poet, as well as a creative ruler, Frederick was regarded by his contemporaries as *stupor mundi*, "the wonder of the world."<sup>7</sup> "By the end of the 12th century, Sicily, with its control of the Mediterranean sea routes, was the richest, most advanced, and highly organized State in Europe."<sup>8</sup>

In its social and political arrangements, however, the South was, and would remain, strictly autocratic, a pattern of authority that was reinforced by Frederick's reforms. His *Constitutiones* reaffirmed the full feudal rights of the barons and declared it "sacrilege" to question the ruler's decisions. "In their comprehensiveness and detail, and above all in their concept of royal authority, Frederick's laws illustrate the singularity of Sicily in western Europe. The *regnum* was held by the Emperor from God himself."<sup>9</sup> Like his great predecessor Roger II, Frederick had a mystical, semidivine conception of the monarch's role, and his rule rested on awe, coupled with terror and occasional cruelty. When he launched a military campaign against the northern communes, it was, he said, to teach a lesson to those who "preferred the luxury of a certain imprecise freedom to stable peace."<sup>10</sup>

Southern towns showed some signs of desire for self-government, but they were soon incorporated within the Norman kingdom and subjugated by a network of central and local officials responsible only to the king. Although the barons, like the townsmen, were controlled by the royal administration, the barons provided the military strength that lay at the core of the regime. Historians debate whether the kingdom is best labelled "feudal," "bureaucratic," or "absolutist," but the best judgment is that it had strong elements of all three. In any event, any glimmerings of communal autonomy were extinguished as soon as they appeared. The civic life of artisans and merchants was regulated from the center and from above, not (as in the North) from within. As Denis Mack Smith concludes,

Sicily was still a fairly rich country where one might have expected a vigorous town life, but in fact she never knew anything like the independent communes which existed in northern Italy; and although this may reflect a simple lack of civic enterprise, it also derived from the fact that the Norman monarchy was too authoritarian and too strong to need to encourage the cities against the baronage. . . . Frederick tied the cities to the state, even though this may have seemed to sacrifice economics to politics. Sicilian history had taught him that prosperity came from a strong kingship, and up to a point he was right: only later events were to show that economic development was arrested in Sicily just when the free maritime communities elsewhere in Italy were becoming adventurous and rich.<sup>11</sup>

As royal power began to fade after Frederick's death, the southern barons gained power and autonomy, but southern towns and cities did not. As the

centuries passed, the steep social hierarchy came to be ever more dominated by a landed aristocracy endowed with feudal powers, while at the bottom masses of peasants struggled wretchedly close to the limits of physical survival. Between these two social formations cowered a small, largely impotent middle class of administrators and professionals. Although southern Italy in the next seven centuries was to be the subject of much bitter contention between various foreign dynasties (especially Spain and France), this hierarchic structure would endure essentially unchanged. The regime remained a feudal monarchy, no matter how enlightened its incumbent, and among Frederick II's successors, enlightenment would turn out to be much rarer than rapacity.

Meanwhile, in the towns of northern and central Italy—"oases amidst the feudal forest"<sup>12</sup>—by contrast, an unprecedented form of self-government was emerging. This communal republicanism gradually came to constitute the major alternative to the manor-based, lord-and-serf feudalism of the rest of medieval Europe. Of this part of Italy, the eminent historian Frederic Lane has written, "From the twelfth to the sixteenth century the feature which most distinguished Italian society from that in other regions in Europe was the extent to which men were able to take part in determining, largely by persuasion, the laws and decisions governing their lives."<sup>13</sup>

Like the autocratic regime of Frederick II, the new republican regime was a response to the violence and anarchy endemic in medieval Europe, for savage vendettas among aristocratic clans had laid waste to the towns and countryside in the North as in the South. The solution invented in the North, however, was quite different, relying less on vertical hierarchy and more on horizontal collaboration. The communes sprang originally from voluntary associations, formed when groups of neighbors swore personal oaths to render one another mutual assistance, to provide for common defense and economic cooperation. "While it would be going too far to describe the early communes as private associations, for they must have been involved in public order from the start, it remains true that they were primarily concerned with the protection of their members and their common interests, and they had no organic connection with the public institutions of the old regime."<sup>14</sup> By the twelfth century communes had been established in Florence, Venice, Bologna, Genoa, Milan, and virtually all the other major towns of northern and central Italy, rooted historically in these primordial social contracts.

The emerging communes were not democratic in our modern sense, for only a minority of the population were full members.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, one distinctive feature of the republican synthesis was the absorption of the rural nobility into the urban patriciate to form a new kind of social elite. However, the extent of popular participation in government affairs was ex-

traordinary by any standard: Daniel Waley describes the communes as "the paradise of the committee-man" and reports that Siena, a town with roughly 5000 adult males, had 860 part-time city posts, while in larger towns the city council might have several thousand members, many of them active participants in the deliberations.<sup>16</sup> In this context, "the success of communal republicanism depended on the readiness of its leaders to share power with others as equals."<sup>17</sup> The executive leaders of the commune were elected according to procedures that varied from town to town.<sup>18</sup> Those who governed the communal republics acknowledged legitimate limits on their rule. "Elaborate legal codes were promulgated to confine the violence of the overmighty."<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the structure of authority in the communal republics was fundamentally more liberal and egalitarian than in contemporary regimes elsewhere in Europe, including, of course, the South of Italy itself.

As communal life progressed, guilds were formed by craftsmen and tradesmen to provide self-help and mutual assistance, for social as well as for strictly occupational purposes.<sup>20</sup> "The oldest guild-statute is that of Verona, dating from 1303, but evidently copied from some much older statute. 'Fraternal assistance in necessity of whatever kind,' 'hospitality towards strangers, when passing through the town' . . . and 'obligation of offering comfort in the case of debility' are among the obligations of the members."<sup>21</sup> "Violation of statutes was met by boycott and social ostracism."<sup>22</sup>

Soon these groups, along with other townsmen, began to press for broader political reform, "some system of representation and control which would secure order: 'the tranquil and peaceful state of the city'.<sup>23</sup>

During the first half of the thirteenth century the guilds became the backbone of radical political movements which sought the distribution of power within the communes on a wider basis than before. . . . [T]hey appropriated the old name of *popolo* ["the people"] with its powerful democratic overtones. By 1250 the *popolo* had secured a dominant position in the constitutions of the major communes.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, at the very moment when Frederick II was strengthening feudal authority in the South, political power in the North had begun to diffuse well beyond the traditional elite. For example, "Modena's town council already in 1220 had many artisans and shopkeepers, including fishmongers and clothes-repairers or rag merchants . . . , as well as the always numerous smiths."<sup>25</sup> The practices of civic republicanism provided a breadth of popular involvement in public decision making without parallel in the medieval world.

These political changes were part of "the burgeoning of associative life with the rise of communes, guilds, business partnerships, . . . new forms

of solidarity [that] expressed a more vivid sense of equality.<sup>26</sup> Beyond the guilds, local organizations, such as *vicinanze* (neighborhood associations), the *populus* (parish organizations that administered the goods of the local church and elected its priest), confraternities (religious societies for mutual assistance), politico-religious parties bound together by solemn oath-takings, and *consorterie* ("tower societies") formed to provide mutual security, were dominant in local affairs.<sup>27</sup>

The oaths of mutual assistance sworn by members of these associations in all sectors of society sounded remarkably like that of the Veronese guild we cited earlier. In 1196 members of a *consorteria* of Bolognese magnates swore "to help each other without fraud and in good faith . . . with our tower and common house and swear that none of us will act against the others directly or through a third party." The statutes of the *Spade* ["Sword"] *compagnia* (1285), one of many voluntary associations in the neighborhoods of Bologna, recorded that its members "should maintain and defend each other against all men, within the commune and outside it." In each case, these broad commitments were followed by elaborate descriptions of the procedures of the association, including the practical assistance to be provided to members, such as legal aid, as well as procedures for resolving disputes among members.<sup>28</sup> "The inevitable conflicts generated within and between these more complex communities called for skilled advocates, mediators and statesmen, and even for a renewed civic morality to prevent the new society from tearing itself apart in internecine strife."<sup>29</sup> This rich network of associational life and the new mores of the republics gave the medieval Italian commune a unique character precisely analogous to what (in the previous chapter) we termed a "civic community."

Public administration in the communal republics was professionalized. A corps of experts in municipal government developed remarkably advanced systems of public finance (including a market in negotiable long-term public securities), land reclamation, commercial law, accounting, zoning, public hygiene, economic development, public education, policing, and government by committee, often sharing ideas with colleagues in neighboring cities. Bologna, with its renowned school of law, played the role of "capital of communal Italy, with an informal pre-eminence based not on force or wealth, but on intellectual leadership."<sup>30</sup> The figure of the *podestà*, an itinerant, professionally trained jurist-administrator elected for a limited term, came to play a key part in communal affairs.<sup>31</sup>

Covenants and contracts were central to all aspects of life in the republics, and the ranks of notaries, lawyers, and judges burgeoned to record, interpret, and enforce these agreements. Bologna, a town of roughly 50,000 inhabitants, is estimated to have had 2000 professional notaries!<sup>32</sup> Such figures could, of course, be seen as an index of the contentiousness

of the republics, but more fundamentally, they signify an unusual confidence in written agreements, in negotiation, and in the law. Nothing signals more clearly the unique contribution of the communal republics than this: At a time when force and family were the only solutions to dilemmas of collective action elsewhere in Europe, citizens of the Italian city-states had devised a new way of organizing collective life.

Ecclesiastical authority in the communal republics was minimal, not because religiosity was replaced by secularism, but because Church hierarchy was supplanted by lay associations:

Without attacking the theoretical supremacy of the pope, townsmen tended to regard the church, like their secular governments, as for all practical purposes a local affair. . . . They saw priests not as superior to other men but as primarily the servants of the communities whose spiritual needs they were supposed to meet. . . . This should not be taken, however, as a sign of any decline in religious fervour. The 14th and 15th centuries were, in fact, a peculiarly devout age in the history of Italy, but Italian devotion now took on a special quality. It found expression in spontaneous and local confraternities of laymen for the purposes of performing pious works and devotional exercises together.<sup>33</sup>

One result of all these developments was a powerful and unparalleled degree of civic commitment:

Along the banks of the Arno and near the Po, in the Veneto as in Liguria, citizens had a first and fervent allegiance to their own cities, to the local shaping of their own political destinies, and this feeling survived the Renaissance. . . . From the day of the commune's emergence, men had found order and protection by grouping together. As the commune had expanded, the life of urban residents came to turn more and more around the decisions and fortified buildings of local government. The feeling that men had their earthly and family fortunes tied to the fortunes of the commune became such as to arouse the most intense loves and hatreds.<sup>34</sup>

Intimately associated with the expansion of civic republicanism was a rapid growth in commerce. As civil order was established, bold and ambitious merchants expanded their trading networks, first in the regions around each city-state and then gradually to the farthest reaches of the known world. "These merchants, masters of the commerce of the world, founders of European capitalism, extended their empire of trade from China to Greenland."<sup>35</sup> For markets of this complexity to evolve, closely integrated communities of traders were crucial, able to sustain legal or quasi-legal institutions to settle disputes, exchange information, and share risks.<sup>36</sup> The prosperity produced by trade helped in turn to shape and sustain the civic institutions of the republics. "Of the ten 'Major Arts' (or

guilds) which largely took over the government of Florence in the thirteenth century, seven were in export trades.”<sup>37</sup>

Mercantile development was vital for the economies of the republics. Its fundamental institutions—markets, money, and law—represented a revival of practices that had been relatively well developed in the classical world. Another economic institution hardly less fundamental than these was, however, quite novel: *Credit* was invented in the medieval Italian republics.<sup>38</sup> At the same time that the Norman kingdom in the Mezzogiorno was enjoying a new prosperity based on social and political hierarchy, the civic republicanism of the northern cities laid the foundations for one of the great economic revolutions in world history, comparable (according to some historians) only to the Neolithic emergence of permanent settlements and the later industrial revolution.

“At the heart of this transformation was an exponential increase in credit.”<sup>39</sup> Earlier epochs, no matter how grand or how mean, had had only the most rudimentary mechanisms for linking savings and investment, and hence their prospects for economic development were limited. Without credit, individual families might accumulate great fortunes, or the state might enforce savings through taxation and invest in massive public works, like the pyramids or the Parthenon, but until some means of efficient intermediation between individual savers and independent investors could be devised, the immense power of private capital accumulation could not be harnessed to economic growth. For this momentous social invention to succeed, the unique context provided by the communal republics proved crucial.

Unlike the wealth of the Sicilian kingdom, based on land, the growing prosperity of the northern Italian city-states was rooted in finance and commerce.<sup>40</sup> Banking and long-distance trade depended on credit, and credit, if it were to be provided efficiently, required mutual trust and confidence that contracts and the laws governing them would be impartially enforced. (Etymologically, “credit” derives from *credere*, “to believe.”) For reasons we shall explore more fully in the next chapter, the institutions of civic republicanism, the networks of associations, and the extension of solidarity beyond the bonds of kinship that had emerged in the northern communes were crucial for this trust and confidence to flourish.

In this rich civic soil sprouted numerous innovations in business practice, which helped generate the affluence, public and private, of Renaissance Florence and her neighbors:

The extension of credit and the increased use of the contract were prominent features of the takeoff in the towns of north and central Italy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In Genoa, Pisa, Venice, and a bit later in Florence, new legal strategies for raising capital and creating partnerships were coming

into vogue. Not surprisingly, the bonds of partnership were grafted onto family ties. . . . By the twelfth century, however, more flexible contractual arrangements were being entered into and the contributions of outsiders welcomed. These changes were manifested in the rise of the *compagnia*, the *commenda* [long-distance shipping enterprises], deposit banking, fiduciary money, and letters of credit. In the new practices and organization of business activity, risks were minimized, whereas opportunities for cooperation and profit were enhanced. . . . We can discern a measure of this expanded trust in the decline of interest rates and the rise of deposit and transfer banking. A *collaborative* attitude between borrower and lender was becoming pervasive in the cities of north and central Italy.”<sup>41</sup>

Through these and other mechanisms, even small savers were enabled to invest in larger commercial enterprises:

The basic fact in the economic history of Europe from the eleventh century onward was that savings were activated for productive purposes to a degree inconceivable in previous centuries. . . . It was the widespread sense of honesty, strengthened by the sense of belonging to an integrated community, quite apart from definite legal obligations, which made possible the participation of all kinds of people with their savings in the productive process.<sup>42</sup>

In sum, in the communal republics of northern medieval Italy, vast improvements in economic life, as well as in governmental performance, were made possible by the norms and networks of civic engagement. Revolutionary changes in the fundamental institutions of politics and economics arose out of this unique social context, with its horizontal ties of collaboration and civic solidarity, and in turn, those political and economic advances reinforced the civic community.

We must not exaggerate the egalitarianism of the communes nor their success in resolving social conflict and controlling violence. Perhaps as many as half of the population were indigent slum-dwellers.<sup>43</sup> Throughout the period the nobility remained an important part of society, even though they were increasingly integrated within, and subordinated to, the life of the republics. Oligarchic families played an essential role in the life of republics like Venice and Florence, even though their power was less untrammeled than in the South. The nobility kept retinues of clients around them. Factionalism was rife. Clan vendettas and violence (including a kind of low-level guerilla warfare) never disappeared from public life. The battle towers and fortified palaces that still adorn Bologna and Florence recall both the social inequalities and the pervasive insecurity that characterized even the most successful of communes.

Nevertheless, social mobility within the republics was higher than anywhere else in Europe at the time. Moreover, the role of collective solidar-

ity in maintaining the civic order marked the northern cities as *sui generis*. One anonymous chronicler in 1291, for instance, reported laconically, "There was a certain disturbance in Parma, and so four trades, that is, the butchers, the smiths, the shoemakers, and furriers, together with the judges and notaries and the other trades of the city, took oath together to maintain themselves, and having made certain provisions, all disturbance immediately stopped."<sup>44</sup>

Thus, by the beginning of the fourteenth century, Italy had produced, not one, but two innovative patterns of governance with their associated social and cultural features—the celebrated Norman feudal autocracy of the South and the fertile communal republicanism of the North. "The Italians were the pacesetters in the art of government, and the Italian states generally developed a greater bureaucratic power to intervene in the lives of their citizens, for good or ill, than was to be found in the other states of the time."<sup>45</sup> In economic and social life, as well as in politics, both the monarchy and the republics had surmounted the dilemmas of collective action and the problems of collective life that still stifled progress elsewhere in Europe. Italy's leading role in Europe could be measured not just politically and economically and artistically, but also demographically: Palermo in the South and Venice and Florence in the North, each with populations over 100,000, were the three largest cities of Europe.<sup>46</sup>

But the systems that had been invented in the North and in the South were quite different, both in their structure and in their consequences. "Two different societies and ways of life here faced other," concludes the historian John Larner.<sup>47</sup> In the North, feudal bonds of personal dependence were weakened; in the South, they were strengthened. In the North, the people were citizens; in the South, they were subjects. Legitimate authority in the North was "only delegated [by the community] to public officials, who remain responsible to those with whose affairs they are entrusted."<sup>48</sup> Legitimate authority in the South was monopolized by the king, who (though he might delegate administrative tasks to officials and might confirm the nobles in their privileges) was responsible only to God. In the North, while religious sentiments remained profound, the Church was only one civil institution among many; in the South, the Church was a powerful and wealthy proprietor in the feudal order.<sup>49</sup> In the North the crucial social, political, and even religious allegiances and alignments were horizontal, while those in the South were vertical. Collaboration, mutual assistance, civic obligation, and even trust—not universal, of course, but extending further beyond the limits of kinship than anywhere else in Europe in this era—were the distinguishing features in the North. The chief virtue in the South, by contrast, was the imposition of hierarchy and order on latent anarchy.

The pre-eminent social issue of the Middle Ages, the *sine qua non* for all progress, was public order. Theft and plunder were common. Protection and refuge might be provided, as in the Norman kingdom, by an autocratic sovereign or the strongest local baron. Or security could be sought instead through interweaving pacts of mutual assistance among rough equals, the more complex strategy followed in the communal republics. As compared to the rest of Christendom, both regimes produced prosperity and efficient government, but the limits of the southern, hierarchic solution to the dilemmas of collective action were already becoming manifest by the thirteenth century. Whereas a hundred years earlier the South generally had been reckoned no less advanced than the North, the communal republics were now pulling rapidly ahead, and the North's lead would continue to widen for the next several centuries. Gradually the full consequences of the differences in community life and social structure between feudal and republican Italies were becoming manifest.

In the feudal world, a vertical arrangement typically prevailed, where relations between men were dictated by the concepts of fief and service; investiture and homage; lord, vassal, and serf. In the cities, a horizontal arrangement emerged, characterized by cooperation among equals. The *gild*; the *confraternity*; the *university*; and above all of them, that gild of gilds, the sworn union among all the burghers, the *Commune*, were institutions created by the new outlook and which reflected the new ideals.<sup>50</sup>

During the fourteenth century, factionalism and famine, the Black Death and the Hundred Years War began to undermine the spirit of the civic community and the stability of republican government. The devastation of the Black Death was extraordinary: More than one third of the entire population of Italy—and probably more than half of the urban population—perished during the savage summer of 1348, and this was followed by recurrent epidemics that severely depressed economic activity for more than a century. Nor was political leadership in the communal republics spared: of the Council of Seven elected in Orvieto at the end of June, 1348, six were dead by August—a decimation that was by no means unique. The cathedral of Siena, only half-finished when the plague struck, remained so—mute evidence of how thoroughly the Black Plague sapped civic energies and shattered civic life.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, the clamor of clashes among broader religious and military forces beyond the city walls echoed increasingly within the republics themselves. "The history of the communes could hardly be other than tumultuous, for they were trying to practice government on conciliar principles in a society which remained intensely hierarchical."<sup>52</sup> Nearly everywhere, Guelphs, Ghibellines, and a hundred other clans struggled in

constant intrigue and often bloody strife. Relying on mercenary armies, individual despots [*signori*] and their families gained political dominance. These new tyrannies were “very long lasting, the medieval *signoria* evolving imperceptibly into the renaissance principate.”<sup>53</sup>

By the beginning of the fourteenth century, more than two hundred years after they had been founded, republican communal governments had begun to succumb to signorial domination, although the despots often continued to pay homage to the forms and ideals of republican government.<sup>54</sup> A significant exception to this spectacle of decay, however, was provided by a belt of cities extending across north-central Italy from Venice on the Adriatic across Emilia and Tuscany to Genoa on the Tyrrhenian Sea, where republican traditions proved hardier than elsewhere further north.<sup>55</sup>

Just as Minerva’s owl of wisdom flies only at dusk, political philosophers began to articulate the essential virtues of the *vita civile* [civic life] of the communal republics only at their demise. The fate of the communes inspired Renaissance political theorists, Machiavelli above all, to reflect on the preconditions for stable republican government, focusing especially on the character of the citizens, their *virtù civile*.

Machiavelli, in a passage of remarkable relevance to our own task of understanding institutional success and failure, argued that republican government (though the most desirable form of government where it could be achieved) was destined to fail where social conditions were unsuitable. In particular, where men lack civic virtue and where social and economic life is organized in feudal fashion, “there has never arisen any republic or any political life, for men born in such conditions are entirely inimical to any form of civic government. In provinces thus organized [like Naples, he added] no attempt to set up a republic could possibly succeed.” In his native Tuscany, by contrast, social conditions were so favorable “that a wise man, familiar with ancient forms of civic government, should easily be able to introduce there a civic constitution.” Machiavelli’s chapter title aptly summarizes what we might term the “iron law of civic community”: “That it is very easy to manage Things in a State in which the Masses are not Corrupt; and that, where Equality exists, it is impossible to set up a Principality, and, where it does not exist, impossible to set up a Republic.”<sup>56</sup>

The works of Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and others “express a feeling for the particular political community as a concrete and continuing entity that is independent of the men and governments in power at any given time and worthy of human affection, loyalty, and support.”<sup>57</sup> At the core of this ideology of the *vita civile* was the ideal of “the model citizen, governing his own affairs in town and country and dutifully participating in the affairs of the state.”<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, by the thirteenth century, the Papacy had acquired temporal sway over the territory between the Kingdom of Sicily in the South and the domain of the communal republics in the North. The Pope ruled over these lands as a feudal monarch, appointing princes to fiefdoms in return for fealty, but his control was less centralized and efficient than that of the Norman regime to the south.<sup>59</sup> Given the somewhat ambiguous temporal authority of the Pope, further weakened during the period of the Avignon papacies between 1305 and 1377, the Papal States encompassed a wide variety of social structure and political practice. In some towns local tyrants resisted Papal interference, while elsewhere “the nobility fought each other, terrorized the countryside, and did as they pleased, and bandits made the region everywhere unsafe.”<sup>60</sup> To the north, on the other hand, the papal territories nominally included several cities with strong communal traditions, such as Ferrara, Ravenna, Rimini, and above all, Bologna.

Figure 5.1 shows the various regimes that characterized Italy at the beginning of the fourteenth century.<sup>61</sup> The map clearly reveals four bands across the peninsula, corresponding to differing degrees of republicanism and autocracy. From south to north, they are as follows:

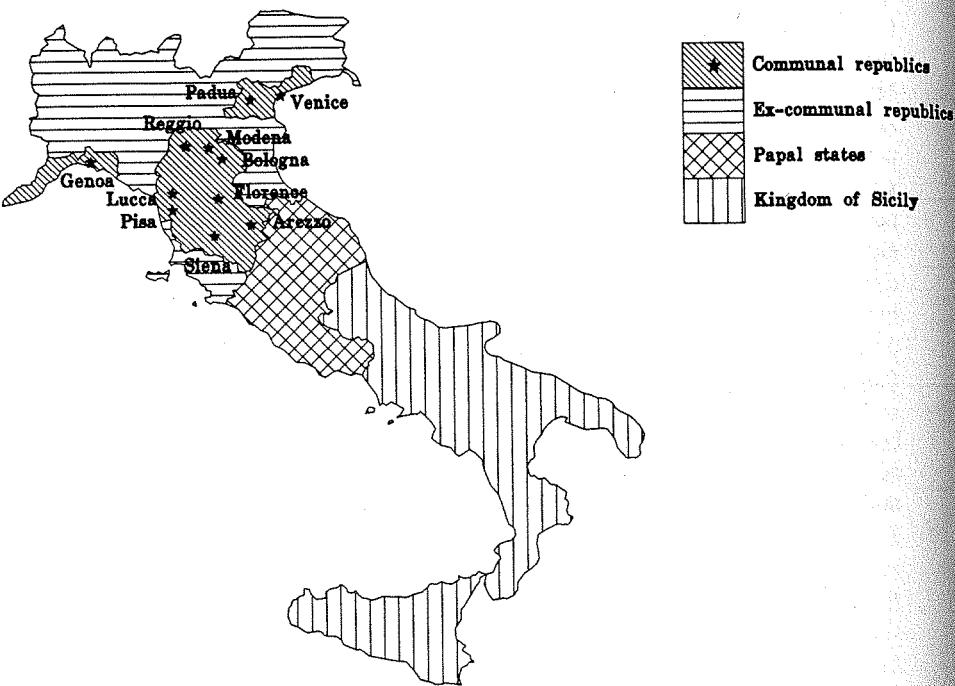
- The feudal monarchy founded by the Normans in the Mezzogiorno;
- The Papal States with their variegated mixture of feudalism, tyranny, and republicanism;
- The heartland of republicanism, those communes which had retained republican institutions into the fourteenth century; and
- The erstwhile republican areas further north that had, by this time, fallen prey to signorial rule.

The parallel between this pattern and the distribution of civic norms and networks in the 1970s, as displayed in Figure 4.4, is remarkable. The southern territories once ruled by the Norman kings constitute exactly the seven least civic regions in the 1970s. Almost as precisely, the Papal States (minus the communal republics that lay in the northern section of the Pope’s domains) correspond to the next three or four regions up the civic ladder in the 1970s. At the other end of the scale, the heartland of republicanism in 1300 corresponds uncannily to the most civic regions of today, followed closely by the areas still further north in which medieval republican traditions, though real, had proved somewhat weaker. To determine whether this intriguing correlation represents a genuine historical continuity or merely a curious coincidence, we shall need to scrutinize the evolution of Italian social and political life during the intervening seven centuries.

During the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, further miseries were inflicted on the peninsula, as Spain, France, and the other ascendant pow-

FIGURE 5.1

Republican and Autocratic Traditions: Italy, c. 1300



Sources: *The Times Atlas of World History*, 3rd edition, eds. Geoffrey Barraclough and Norman Stone (London: Times Books, 1989), p. 124; J. K. Hyde, *Society and Politics in Medieval Italy: The Evolution of the Civil Life, 1000–1350* (London: Macmillan, 1973), Map 4; and John Larner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch: 1216–1380* (New York: Longman, 1980), pp. 137–150.

ers of Europe fought their bloody dynastic duels in the Italian arena. The demographic and economic consequences of these foreign invasions, together with the devastating plagues and trade disruptions of the previous century, were especially traumatic for the communes of the North. The populations of Brescia and Pavia, for instance, each fell by two-thirds during the early years of the sixteenth century, as a result of repeated assaults and sacking. Not until the nineteenth century would the cities of the North reach once again their medieval population levels. The South, by contrast, escaped much of this destruction. The population of Naples, for example, doubled during the fifteenth century and more than redoubled during the first half of the sixteenth century, becoming (after Paris)

the second largest city in Europe. Contrary to the population flows of the twentieth century, many northerners migrated southwards during the sixteenth century, drawn by the relative prosperity of the South, coupled with the dismal downfall of the North. In the first half of the seventeenth century, just as the glimmerings of economic revival began to appear, new waves of epidemics swept across Italy. In 1630–31 and again in 1656–57, up to half of the population of the cities of the Center and North perished from the plague.<sup>62</sup>

By the seventeenth century, all the cities of central and northern Italy had ceased to be republican or even, in many cases, independent. The collapse of communal republicanism led to a kind of “re-feudalization” of the Italian peninsula. Mercantile and financial innovation was replaced by a preoccupation with land ownership and parasitic indolence. Local conflicts, factional struggles, and convoluted conspiracies signified the dissolution of the social fabric, just as the other states of Europe were moving toward national unity.<sup>63</sup>

Throughout Italy, North and South, autocratic politics were now embodied in patron-client networks. However, among the northern heirs to the communal tradition, patrons, no matter how autocratic, still accepted civic responsibilities—a usage echoed in our expression “patron of the arts.” Careful anthropological reconstruction of this epoch in the life of a central Italian hill town has confirmed that although the local gentry monopolized political power, they also subsidized civic life by endowing hospitals and roads, local choirs and bands, and even municipal offices and the salaries of town clerks. The ethic of mutual responsibility persisted in the northern countryside, as well, as, for example, in the *aiutarella*, a traditional practice of work exchange among neighbors.<sup>64</sup> Thus, despite the spread of inequality, exploitation, and factional conflict, the northern heritage of communal republicanism, although no longer embodied in political institutions, was transmitted in the form of an ethic of civic involvement, social responsibility, and mutual assistance among social equals.

Patterns of authority in the North were no longer so distinct from the feudal structures of the Mezzogiorno. Nevertheless, something of the glorious experience of the communes, and of the intense economic activity that civic engagement had generated, survived in the Po Valley and Tuscany, so that these regions would be more receptive to the first breezes of renewed progress, first cultural and then economic, that whispered along the peninsula in the second half of the eighteenth century. Despite the social and economic gloom provoked by several centuries of foreign depredation, pestilence, and domestic strife, the ideal of the *vita civile* persisted in the regions of communal republican traditions.

Meanwhile, the medieval heritage of governance in the South provided

an enduring contrast. Frederick II's sovereign had offered a solution of a sort to problems of collective action, but this solution was soon corrupted by the proverbial effects of absolute power: King and barons became predatory autocrats. Government remained feudal and autocratic, tempered only by episodic, ephemeral rebellion. Authoritarian political institutions were reinforced by the tradition of vertical social networks, embodying power asymmetries, exploitation and dependence, in contrast to the northern tradition of horizontal associations, joining rough equals in mutual solidarity. Patron-client politics in the South was more personalistic, more exploitative, more transitory, less "civil."

By the eighteenth century, "the Kingdom of Naples, with its two sections, one on the mainland and the other in Sicily, was by far the biggest State in Italy with its five million inhabitants, but for a long time it was possibly also the worst administered, the most routine-bound and negligent."<sup>65</sup> As had been true in the earliest medieval period, and as remains true today—contrary to a common misapprehension—the South was no less urban than the North during much of this period.<sup>66</sup> In 1791 Naples' population was twice that of Rome, three times that of Milan, four times that of Turin or Florence; but Naples was "a grotesque parasite, many of whose inhabitants were royal employees, priests, domestic servants, and beggars. She lived on the back of a desperately overworked, desperately poor, peasantry, who were given no civic rights."<sup>67</sup> In the southern cities, the power of the nobility remained paramount, with "little of that mingling of nobles and townsmen so characteristic of society in the north."<sup>68</sup>

In the North the aristocracy's power, which had long been challenged, was already beginning to erode. By contrast, "in the south 'during the first decades of the eighteenth century the political jurisdictional and economic power of the barony [was] still virtually intact.' There, the process of overthrowing feudalism was particularly slow: at the end of the century the power of the barons was still extremely strong."<sup>69</sup> The gulf between rulers and ruled was exacerbated in the Mezzogiorno by the fact that virtually all the successive dynasties that controlled the South were alien. From 1504 until 1860, all of Italy south of the Papal States was ruled by the Hapsburgs and the Bourbons, who (as Anthony Pagden has recently described in detail) systematically promoted mutual distrust and conflict among their subjects, destroying horizontal ties of solidarity in order to maintain the primacy of vertical ties of dependence and exploitation.<sup>70</sup>

Despite the eclipse of communal republicanism in the North after the fourteenth century, as the democratic revolutions that were to sweep Europe in the nineteenth century approached the Italian peninsula, the discerning observer could detect the continuing regional differences of culture and social structure that had appeared in the medieval era seven centuries earlier. As we shall see, those enduring differences would pow-

erfully condition how the various regions would respond to the new challenges and opportunities that loomed ahead, as Italy achieved national unification.

### CIVIC TRADITIONS AFTER UNIFICATION

The nineteenth century was a time of unusual ferment in the associational life of much of Western Europe, particularly among the so-called "popular" classes—that is, the great bulk of the population. Older forms of organized sociability, such as the medieval guilds and religious societies, had gradually lost vitality over the preceding centuries, and were mere remnants from that earlier age when they had genuinely engaged popular interests and passions. Winds of change, spawned by the French Revolution, now swept away much of this moldering social underbrush. Inspired by the astringent doctrine of *laissez faire*, liberal governments in France, Italy, and elsewhere abolished guilds, dissolved religious establishments, and discouraged the revival of any similar social or economic "combinations." To enforce this new order, officials in France and Italy kept close surveillance over (and often tried to suppress) even such innocuous signs of organized sociability as workingmen's drinking clubs.

This attempted eradication of association—the contemporary background, incidentally, against which Tocqueville was writing his encoumion of associationism in America—was not borne lightly in the villages and towns of the continent. Soon, the first stirrings of the industrial revolution made the creation of new forms of organized social and economic solidarity even more urgent. To the ancestral hazards of illness, accident, and old age were now added the unaccustomed perils of unemployment and the unpleasant anonymity of the new industrial centers. Nor were those who remained on the land immune to novel ills, as the agricultural panics of the second half of the century made plain. In a time of turbulence and uncertainty many people sought aid and solace in organized camaraderie. Like a verdant second growth following a forest conflagration, new and more vital associations began to spring up to replace those that had decayed or been destroyed earlier in the century.

This "great surge in popular sociability" (in the words of the eminent French social historian Maurice Agulhon) arose in France in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> It was manifested in Masonic lodges and *circles*, in popular drinking clubs (*chambre*) and choral societies, in religious fraternities and peasant clubs, and most especially in mutual aid societies, created to provide self-help insurance against the costs of sickness, accidents, old age, and burial. Many of the associations had extremely detailed written statutes, "remarkable for their preoccupation

with financial rigour, the fair distribution of tasks and political and moral guarantees—in short, with efficiency in the widest sense of the term.”<sup>72</sup>

Although many of the associations were formed predominantly by members of the lower classes, membership often cut across conventional social boundaries within the local community; one *cercle*, for example, “was, for the most part, composed of ‘workers and artisans,’ ‘masons, locksmiths and cobblers’ with, at their head, a number of bourgeois or rather petits bourgeois who were also intellectuals.”<sup>73</sup> Although social inequalities were clearly still important within the village, the social structure encouraged by the new associationism was difficult to classify,

somewhere between, on the one hand, the old-style patronage and, on the other, the new egalitarianism. . . . It looks as though there was a progress from right to left, that is from a structure of patronage, which was conservative, to an egalitarian structure which was democratic and that this passed through an intermediary phase of democratic patronage.<sup>74</sup>

Although these groups were not overtly political, they often came to have political affinities with one or another of the *tendances* of French political life. Social interaction and the exercise of organizational skills widened the cultural horizons of the participants and quickened their political awareness and (eventually) their political involvement. “For the lower classes of Provence at this period, to set themselves up as a *chambree* was, just as much and perhaps even more than learning to read, to become accessible to whatever was new, to change and to independence.”<sup>75</sup> Agulhon’s painstaking reconstruction of life in several southern French villages of this era has shown how this cultural mobilization in the years after 1830 contributed directly to the great political mobilizations of 1848.

Italian social historiography of this period awaits its Agulhon, so we lack any similarly evocative portrait of social life in the early nineteenth-century Italian town. Nevertheless, it seems likely that similar trends appeared during the *Risorgimento* (or “resurgence”) that roused Italians to political action and led in 1870 to the political unification of Italy.<sup>76</sup> In fact, much of the argument for unification was based on claims for the “principle of association” which all the various nationalist movements (Mazzinians, neo-Guelphs, Cavourian moderates) stressed. Scientific congresses, professional associations, and reformist groups (especially in Piedmont, Tuscany and Lombardy) pressed for major social, economic, and political reforms. Newly formed associations (including the renowned “secret societies”) and newspapers were central to the abortive revolutions of 1848 and to the nationalist agitation that led to the plebiscites of 1860 that ratified unification. New civic, charitable, and educational associations were founded in most cities and towns.<sup>77</sup>

A particularly important manifestation of this “principle of association” in post-unification Italy was the development of mutual aid societies, directly analogous to their French counterparts and to the “friendly societies” of Britain, also founded in this period. In the aftermath of the suppression of the Italian guilds and “pious societies,” particularly after 1850, these mutual aid societies—“the first embryo of an associative process”<sup>78</sup>—were founded to alleviate the social and economic hardships of urban artisans and craftsmen.

The functions of the mutual aid societies included benefits to aged and incapacitated members and those otherwise unable to work; aid to families of deceased members; compensation for industrial accidents; payments to unemployed workers; monetary encouragement to members traveling in search of jobs; funeral expenses; nursing and maternity care; and the provision of educational opportunities for members and their families, including night schools, elementary instruction, arts and crafts, and circulating libraries. Although the mutual aid societies responded particularly to the needs of the urban working classes, their membership and their appeal cut across conventional boundaries of class, economic sector, and politics.<sup>79</sup> In effect, mutual aid societies provided a locally organized, underfunded, self-help version of what the twentieth century would call the welfare state.

These voluntary associations signified less an idealistic altruism than a pragmatic readiness to cooperate with others similarly placed in order to surmount the risks of a rapidly changing society. At the core of the mutual aid societies was practical reciprocity: I’ll help you if you help me; let’s face these problems together that none of us can face alone. In this sense, these new forms of sociability were directly reminiscent of the formation of the medieval communes more than seven centuries earlier, with their fabric of organized collective action for mutual benefit. Just as the earliest medieval self-help associations represented voluntary cooperation to address the elemental insecurity of that age—the threat of physical violence—so mutual aid societies represented collective solidarity in the face of the economic insecurities peculiar to the modern age.

At about this same time and often under the aegis of mutual aid societies, cooperative organizations also began to spring up among both producers and consumers. “Like mutual aid societies, Italian cooperatives grew out of the conservative principle of self-help and endeavored to better the lot of their members without seeking drastic changes in existing economic arrangements.”<sup>80</sup> The new organizations spread through all sectors of the economy; there were agricultural cooperatives, labor cooperatives, credit cooperatives, cooperative rural banks, producer cooperatives, and consumer cooperatives, the latter comprising more than half of all cooperatives by 1889. In fact, concludes one close student of working

class organization, "the variety of cooperatives in Italy made that country unique in the world of cooperation."<sup>81</sup>

Although cooperatives were becoming common in much of Europe in this period, one of the distinguishing features of the Italian movement was its strength among unlettered peasants in the countryside. Many cooperatives were founded in the 1880s in the North "to carry out public works schemes during winter unemployment."<sup>82</sup> For example, in 1883 a group of landless *braccianti* in Emilia-Romagna formed a cooperative to bid for contracts for land drainage.

There were co-operative dairies and wine factories, as well as co-operative rural banks, and for perishable truck-garden produce a joint sales organization was most necessary. Agricultural experts were employed by a society and sent around to give demonstrations on market days, to teach pruning and wine production and the use of vegetables in the rotation of crops.<sup>83</sup>

These forms of organized but voluntary social solidarity grew rapidly in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Membership in the mutual aid societies more than quadrupled in the three decades after 1870 and peaked at the turn of the century. "The period from 1860 to 1890 must be characterized as the golden age of mutual aid societies," concludes one scholar.<sup>84</sup> The comparable surge in cooperatives occurred a decade or so later.

The ancestry of these organizational initiatives in prior forms of organized sociability, particularly in northern Italy, was often quite conscious and explicit. The first of the new cooperatives, for example, was the Society of Artistic Glassware in the glassmaking center of Altare in Liguria:

On Christmas night of 1856, Giuseppe Cesio took the lead in bringing together 84 artisans of this ancient craft in Altare. They proposed to better their lot, greatly threatened by economic depression and the aftermath of the cholera epidemic, through the formation of a cooperative association. The ritual which elaborated this declaration of purpose suggested the revival of the medieval tradition of this region of Liguria where, around the year 1000, there sprang up the famous guild of Altare which survived until its suppression by King Carlo Felice on June 6, 1823.<sup>85</sup>

Although the manifest purposes of these organizations were nonpolitical, they served important latent political functions. Like their French counterparts, the Italian mutual aid societies were formally nonpartisan, although some were vaguely radical and republican, and others were variously liberal, socialist, or Catholic in inspiration. The cooperative movement, too, remained independent of political parties, though collaborating with mutual aid societies and the nascent trade union movement. Despite this nonpartisanship, however, participation in these activities

must have had what a later generation would term "consciousness-raising" effects, for many leaders in the newly emerging labor unions and political movements came from the world of mutual aid societies and cooperatives. Union activity in both agriculture and industry expanded rapidly during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The largest of the union federations was socialist in orientation, but there was also a strong Catholic-inspired federation, along with a number of independent organizations.

Meanwhile, from the 1870s to the 1890s, the "Social Catholicism" movement spawned numerous lay associations, particularly in the strongly Catholic Northeast. By 1883–84 the most influential lay organization, the *Opera dei Congressi e dei Comitati Cattolici*, had 993 parish committees in the North, 263 in Central Italy, though only 57 in the South; and "by 1897 the 'Opera' claimed 3,892 parish committees, 708 youth sections, 17 university circles, 688 workers' associations, 588 rural banks, 24 daily newspapers, 105 periodicals, and many other organizations and activities."<sup>86</sup> Although the South was no less devoutly Catholic than the North, it was notably less represented in the civic associations of Social Catholicism, as it would be in Catholic Action after World War II.<sup>87</sup>

The incipient socialist counterparts to these Catholic organizations were centered in the Chambers of Labor:

The Chambers, or their offshoots, organized housing co-operatives, co-operative shops, and educational associations. They often produced their own magazines and ran their own recreational facilities. . . . They illustrate how the allegedly 'modern', Socialist labour movement was deeply impregnated with the older, Mazzinian ideals of local co-operatives and self-help, of laicism and mutual aid.<sup>88</sup>

Although universal manhood suffrage was not established in Italy until World War I, several mass-based political movements were formed around the turn of the century. The socialist movement constituted the largest and most active of these new parties, with growing strength both in areas of incipient industrialization and in some parts of the countryside, where it drew on local traditions of collective peasant and sharecropper protest. The new political mobilization also included an important and growing progressive Catholic movement, especially in the Northeast, where the lay associations of Social Catholicism had been most active in the preceding two decades. In 1919, on the eve of the first postwar elections, the Catholic movement was formally constituted as the *Partito popolare*, or Popular party. The electoral strength of these two parties, the socialists and the *popolari*, jointly representing organized mass opposition to the traditional regime, reached a peak just after World War I in the few years of universal male suffrage before the advent of Fascism.

Both the socialists and the *popolari* drew on the heritage of social mobilization, the organizational infrastructure, and the energies of the mutual aid societies, the cooperatives, and the labor unions. Sesto San Giovanni, for example, an industrial suburb of Milan, was the site of two strong and rivalrous community networks, one Catholic and one socialist, each of which included housing and consumer cooperatives, educational and athletic associations, bands and choral groups, and so forth.<sup>89</sup> The two parties were natural rivals for the allegiance of the masses of the Italian electorate, and each had particular regional strongholds. Generally speaking, the socialist party and its labor affiliates flourished in the industrializing areas around Milan, Turin, and Genoa, whereas the *popolari* and their associated unions were stronger in agricultural areas. This rivalry would provide the basis for the dominant image of Italian political society after World War II, centered on the conflict between two “institutionalized traditions” or “subcultures,” the red (socialist) and the white (Catholic).<sup>90</sup>

This red/white image is in some respects misleading, however, for despite their rivalry, the two mass-based parties had common sociological roots in ancient traditions of collective solidarity and horizontal collaboration. At the turn of the century they also shared opposition to the existing authorities. Both were weakest where the established conservative alliance, based on clientelist ties with established social elites of landowners and officeholders, was strongest. At the grass-roots of Italian politics, the main alternative to the socialists and the *popolari* was the labyrinth of vertical patron-client networks that for nearly half a century had provided the basis of the system of *trasformismo*, in which state patronage was bartered (via local notables) for electoral support. After World War II these same patron-client networks, now increasingly organized within the framework of the mass parties themselves, would persist as the primary structure of power in the less civic regions of Italy.<sup>91</sup>

Although mutual aid societies, cooperatives, and other manifestations of civic solidarity were established in all sectors of the economy and in all parts of the peninsula, they were not equally extensive or equally successful everywhere. In north-central Italy, mirroring almost precisely that area where the communal republics had longest endured five centuries earlier (and where the most civic regions would be found in the 1970s), the medieval traditions of collaboration persisted, even among poor peasants. “A significant network of social and economic obligations, particularly in the countryside, is formed by the recognition of neighborhoodship. Between *vicini* [neighbors] there is continuous mutual aid and exchange of services.”<sup>92</sup>

Sharecropping families had in fact developed a rich network of exchanges and mutual aid: typical of these was the *aiutarella*, the exchange of labour

between families at crucial moments in the agricultural calendar, such as at threshing time. On a cultural level there was also the important practice of the *veglia*. During the long winter evenings, families would gather in the stables or kitchens of the farmhouses, to play cards and games, to knit and to mend, to listen to and tell stories. Participation in the *veglia* was not segregated family by family. Rather, . . . it involved rotating hospitality and a complex system of visiting.<sup>93</sup>

By stark contrast, an 1863 report concluded that in Calabria, a desolate land locked in the southern traditions of authoritarian rule (and destined to rank as the least civic of all the regions in the 1970s), there were “no associations, no mutual aid; everything is isolation. Society is held up by the natural civil and religious bonds alone; but of economic bonds there is nothing, no solidarity between families or between individuals or between them and the government.”<sup>94</sup>

In areas of Italy long subjected to autocratic rule, national unification did little to inculcate civic habits:

In all classes the absence of a community sense resulted from a habit of insubordination learned in centuries of despotism. Even the nobles had become accustomed to obstruction, and thought that governments could be fairly cheated without moral obliquity so long as the cheating were successful. . . . Instead of recognizing that taxes had to be paid, the attitude was rather that if one group of people had discovered a profitable evasion, then other groups had better look to their own interests. Each province, each class, each industry thus endeavored to gain at the expense of the community.<sup>95</sup>

Southern agriculture, although complicated by a crazy-quilt patchwork of landholding, was typified by the *latifondo*,<sup>96</sup> or large estate, worked by impoverished peasants:

The peasants were in constant competition with each other for the best strips of land on the *latifondo*, and for what meagre resources were available. Vertical relationships between patron and client, and obsequiousness to the landlord, were more important than horizontal solidarities. As Bevilacqua has written for the period 1880–1920: ‘The peasant classes were more at war amongst themselves than with the other sectors of rural society; a war which fed off a terrain of recurring and real contrasts, both economic, psychological and cultural.’ That such attitudes triumphed can only be understood in the context of a society which was dominated by distrust. . . . [T]he weight of the past, when combined with the failures of state authority after 1860 and the disastrous peasant-landlord relations . . . produced a society where *fede pubblica* (civic trust) had been reduced to a minimum: ‘*chi ara diritto, muore disperato*’ (he who behaves honestly comes to a miserable end) was a noted Calabrian proverb.<sup>97</sup>

The primeval mistrust that rent the social fabric in these regions was, in fact, captured in innumerable proverbs:

- “Damned is he who trusts another.”
- “Don’t make loans, don’t give gifts, don’t do good, for it will turn out bad for you.”
- “Everyone thinks of his own good and cheats his companion.”
- “When you see the house of your neighbor on fire, carry water to your own.”<sup>98</sup>

In the Mezzogiorno, above all, observed Pasquale Villari in 1883, “One feels too much the ‘I’ and too little the ‘we’.”<sup>99</sup>

The combination of impoverishment and mutual distrust forestalled horizontal solidarity and fostered what Banfield has called “amoral familism.”<sup>100</sup> “In an overcrowded latifundia economy,” recalls Sidney Tarrow, “the village square was an employment bureau where the fortunate few found a day’s labor while their bitter neighbors looked on.”<sup>101</sup> “Each became different from the other; he came to find himself ever more involved in a bitter battle of competition to obtain work or to be able to cultivate a little land, and thus participated less in class solidarity and in the life of the collectivity, and appeared exclusively interested in the progress of himself and his family.”<sup>102</sup> Mark the contrast with those landless *braccianti* of civic Emilia-Romagna who, facing a similar dilemma, formed a voluntary cooperative to seek shared work.

As Tarrow, among other scholars, has emphasized, the South *was not* (and *is not*) apolitical or asocial.<sup>103</sup> On the contrary, political cunning and social connections have long been essential to survival in this melancholy land. The relevant distinction is not between the presence and absence of social bonds, but rather between horizontal bonds of mutual solidarity and vertical bonds of dependency and exploitation. The southerner—whether peasant or city-dweller, whether in the old Hapsburg kingdom of the sixteenth century, the new Italian kingdom of the nineteenth century, or (as we saw in the previous chapter) the regional politics of the late twentieth century—has sought refuge in vertical bonds of patronage and clientelism, employed for both economic and political ends:

Clientelism is the product of a disorganic society and tends to preserve social fragmentation and disorganization. . . . Turiello [a close observer of the Mezzogiorno in the 1880s] refers again and again to the ‘excessive isolation (*scioltezza*) of individuals’ who feel no moral bond outside the family, and views the clientele as the specific remedy for a disjointed society. The clientele, he wrote, are ‘the only associations which actually show real operative energy in a civil society which has been divided within itself for centuries’ and in which people unite not on the basis of mutual trust but only when forced by necessity.<sup>104</sup>

The new institutions of the unified nation-state, far from homogenizing traditional patterns of politics, were themselves pulled ineluctably into conformity with those contrasting traditions, just as the regional governments after 1970 would be remolded by these same social and cultural contexts:

In the 1870s, one can say that the most advanced provinces of Italy already were expressing their preferences through free institutions or associations—agrarian associations, mutual aid societies, chambers of commerce, savings banks—while the southern ones were more inclined to make use of personal contacts or parliamentary and municipal clienteles.<sup>105</sup>

The southern feudal nobility—along with elements of the urban professional classes who had acquired common land and Church properties expropriated by the newly-forged Italian state—used private violence, as well as their privileged access to state resources, to reinforce vertical relations of dominion and personal dependency and to discourage horizontal solidarity.<sup>106</sup> Leopoldo Franchetti, a civic-minded Tuscan landowner who in 1876 authored a remarkable analysis of social conditions in Sicily, concluded:

The landed classes ruled from on high the network of clientelistic structures at various levels and maintained contact for their own advantage with the supreme representative organs of the country. . . . Every local notable in his jurisdiction of power was the head of a network of persons of the most diverse social conditions, who depended on him for their economic survival and social prestige and who furnished him legal support in terms of electoral suffrage and illegal support in the recourse to private violence in defense of his particular interests, in a rigorously hierarchical relationship of para-feudal dependence.<sup>107</sup>

For wretchedly vulnerable peasants, recourse to patron-client ties was a sensible response to an atomized society. One recent account of the “moral economy” of life on a *latifondo* estate in Calabria in the first half of the nineteenth century recounts that peasants in fact feared exclusion from the patron-client system, for it alone assured their physical subsistence, along with the necessary intermediation with distant state authorities and a primitive kind of private welfare program (pensions for widows and orphans and occasional “gratuities”), so long as the peasant-client remained obedient, “faithful” to the estate, and “available” to perform chores as required by the landlord-patron.<sup>108</sup> In the absence of horizontal solidarity, as exemplified by mutual aid societies, vertical dependence is a rational strategy for survival—even when those who are dependent recognize its drawbacks.<sup>109</sup>

The dispossessed southern peasantry did not always endure their fate in

silence. Violent protest movements, including chronic brigandage, flared like heat lightning across the Mezzogiorno landscape throughout the late nineteenth century. However, these anarchic episodes (unlike the contemporary urban and rural strike waves in the center and north of the country) produced no permanent organization and left little residue of collective solidarity.<sup>110</sup> The South remained, as the great Communist intellectual Antonio Gramsci lamented, “a great social disaggregation.”<sup>111</sup> Despite the occasional violent revolts, “it is more important to emphasize the more usual passive reaction of resigned submission. For it is this submission that provides the historical background to the acceptance of the arrogation of power by individuals, viz. the *mafiosi*, by the rest of the population.”<sup>112</sup>

Organized criminality bears different labels in various parts of the Mezzogiorno—*Mafia* in Sicily, *Camorra* in Campania, *'Ndrangheta* in Calabria, and so on, but the phenomenon everywhere has a broadly similar structure. Historians, anthropologists, and criminologists debate its specific historical origins, but most agree that it is based on traditional patterns of patron-clientelism, and that it burgeoned in response to the weaknesses of the administrative and judicial structures of the state, in turn further undermining the authority of those structures. “The chronic weakness of the State resulted in the emergence of self-help institutions, and the exclusive power position of informal groups subsequently made it impossible for the State to win the loyalty of the public, while its resultant weakness again strengthened the family, the clientage, and *mafioso* positions.”<sup>113</sup>

If the absence of credible state enforcement of laws and contracts was one precondition for the emergence of the Mafia, a second, no less important, was the ancient culture of mistrust. Diego Gambetta emphasizes this prerequisite for *mafioso* power: “Distrust percolates through the social ladder, and the unpredictability of sanctions generates uncertainty in agreements, stagnation in commerce and industry, and a general reluctance towards impersonal and extensive forms of cooperation.”<sup>114</sup> As Franchetti, the aristocratic Tuscan visitor to Sicily, observed in 1876:

Matters naturally reached a point where the instinct of self-preservation made everyone ensure the help of someone stronger; since no legitimate authority in fact existed, it fell to clientelism to provide the force which held society together. . . . A very unequal distribution of wealth; a total absence of the concept of equality before the law; a predominance of individual power; the exclusively personal character of all social relations; all this [was] accompanied (as was inevitable) by the bitterest of hatreds, by a passion for revenge, by the idea that whoever did not provide justice for himself lacked honor.<sup>115</sup>

Given this pervasive lack of trust and security, ensured neither by the state nor by civic norms and networks, *mafiosi* (and their counterparts

elsewhere in the South) provided a kind of privatized Leviathan. “The Mafia offered protection against bandits, against rural theft, against the inhabitants of rival towns, above all against itself.”<sup>116</sup> Mafia “enforcers” enabled economic agents to negotiate agreements with a modicum of confidence that those agreements would be kept. “The most specific activity of *mafiosi* consists in producing and selling a very special commodity, intangible, yet indispensable in a majority of economic transactions. Rather than producing cars, beer, nuts and bolts, or books, they produce and sell trust.”<sup>117</sup>

As one *mafioso* explained his role, “One man will come and say: ‘I have a problem with Tizio, do see if you can settle the matter for me.’ I summon the person concerned to me or else I go and visit him—according to what terms we are on—and I reconcile them.”<sup>118</sup> (The *mafioso*, of course, also has an interest in increasing demand for his services by judicious injections of distrust into the system, to prevent his customers from establishing independent mutual trust.) Despite the manifold costs of this system—social, economic, political, psychic, and moral—from the point of an individual trapped, powerless, in the desolate anarchy of the Mezzogiorno, “to choose to obtain the *mafioso*’s protection can hardly be considered irrational.”<sup>119</sup>

Only a romantic idealization of the Mafia, however, could ignore its fundamentally hierarchic, exploitative nature. In the nineteenth century, *mafiosi* served as violent middlemen between absentee landlords and their clients.<sup>120</sup> As older forms of feudalism began to break down, “the ancient *bravi* [underlings] of the feudal lords went into business for themselves and continued to exercise violence for private purposes. . . . These malefactors, freed from the pure system of feudal relations, became thus an essential factor in the clientelistic system that took its place.”<sup>121</sup> Like the conventional clientelism it mirrored, the Mafia adjusted quickly to the new institutions of the Italian state, and inexorably reshaped the practices of representative democracy into conformity with traditional patterns of exploitation and dependence.

The structure of the Mafia itself is classically based on vertical (often unstable) relations of authority and dependence, with little or no horizontal solidarity among equals. According to Hess’s detailed account, the basic organizational unit of the Mafia, the *cosca*, is not a group:

Interaction and an awareness of ‘we’, a consciousness of an objective to be jointly striven for, are absent or slight. Essentially it is a multitude of dyadic relationships maintained by the *mafioso* (m) with persons independent of each other ( $X_1 - X_n$ ). . . . None of the X persons regards himself as a member of an organization, in a way that a bandit or partisan regards himself as belonging to a gang or to a resistance group, i.e., to groups which can survive even after the elimination of the leader.<sup>122</sup>

Organized criminality is an organic element in the pattern of horizontal mistrust and vertical exploitation/dependence that has characterized southern culture and social structure for at least a millennium.<sup>123</sup>

### MEASURING THE DURABILITY OF CIVIC TRADITIONS

Standard historical accounts are unambiguous in their contrasting descriptions of civic engagement in the North and in the South. However, this broad contrast obscures important and enduring differences within each of these two broad sections of the country, differences from region to region and even from province to province. For example, Pino Arlacchi's careful description of life in three areas within nineteenth-century Calabria contrasts the naked authoritarianism of Crotone and the clan violence of Gioia Tauro with the unexpected tradition of cooperatives and mutual aid in nearby Cosentino. To these contrasting traditions, Arlacchi traces the marked differences in social stability and economic progress that have characterized these three areas in the postwar period.<sup>124</sup> We have already noted some variation in the tenacity of civic traditions among the various regions of the North. If we are to establish more systematically the fine-grained linkages between these traditions and the incidence of the civic community profiled in the previous chapter, we must move beyond qualitative sketches to quantitative assessments. We must discipline our tale by careful counting.

The available statistical evidence confirms the stark differences from region to region in associationism and collective solidarity a century ago. By 1904, for example, Piedmont had more than seven times as many mutual aid societies as Puglia, in proportion to population. By 1915, cooperative membership per capita was eighteen times greater in Emilia-Romagna than in Molise. These regional concentrations depended in turn on the pre-existing traditions of collaboration and sociability. Often an ancient guild found reincarnation in a “pious society” in the eighteenth century, which in turn evolved into a mutual aid society, which encouraged cooperatives, which subsequently formed the basis for labor unions and mass-based political parties.

All these modern manifestations of social solidarity and political mobilization, stretching over the six decades between 1860 and 1920—mutual aid societies, cooperatives, and mass-based political parties—were closely intercorrelated. They were associated as well with other manifestations of civic involvement and sociability, including electoral participation and cultural and recreational associations. The available nationwide quantitative indicators of civic engagement in the late nineteenth century thus include the following:

- Membership in mutual aid societies;<sup>125</sup>
- Membership in cooperatives;<sup>126</sup>
- Strength of the mass parties;<sup>127</sup>
- Turnout in the few relatively open elections before Fascism brought authoritarian rule to Italy;<sup>128</sup>
- The longevity of local associations.<sup>129</sup>

The impressive intercorrelations among these several metrics (shown in detail in Appendix F) demonstrate that, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the same Italian regions that sustained cooperatives and choral societies also provided the most support for mutual aid societies and mass parties, and that citizens in those same regions were the most eager to make use of their newly granted electoral rights. Elsewhere, by contrast, apathy and ancient vertical bonds of clientelism restrained civic involvement and inhibited voluntary, horizontally organized manifestations of social solidarity.

In order to explore the historical antecedents of “civic-ness” in contemporary Italy, we have combined these five indicators into a single factor score, representing nineteenth-century traditions of civic involvement, as summarized in Table 5.1.<sup>130</sup> Figure 5.2 charts how these traditions of civic involvement varied across the regions that Italy comprised in the half century between roughly 1860 and 1920.

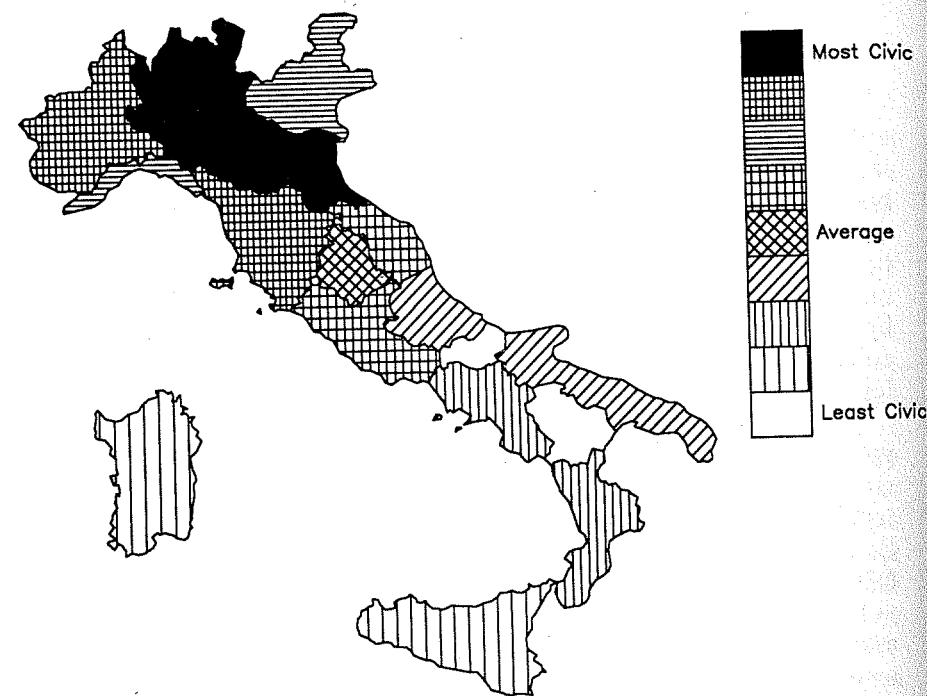
Even a cursory comparison of Figure 5.2 with Figure 4.4 attests to the astonishing constancy of regional traditions of civic involvement through more than a century of vast social change. A more convenient way of visualizing this continuity is provided in Figure 5.3, which arrays the almost perfect correlation between our Civic Community Index for the 1970s and 1980s and our comparable measure of civic involvement a century earlier.<sup>131</sup> Despite the massive waves of migration, economic change, and social upheaval that have swept along the peninsula in the intervening decades, contemporary civic norms and practices recapitulate regional traditions that were well established long ago.<sup>132</sup>

Where Italians a century ago were most actively engaged in new forms

**TABLE 5.1**  
Traditions of Civic Involvement, 1860–1920

Component	Loading
Strength of mass-based parties, 1919–1921	0.97
Incidence of cooperatives, 1889–1915	0.93
Membership in mutual aid societies, 1873–1904	0.91
Electoral turnout, 1919–1921	0.78
Local associations founded before 1860	0.56

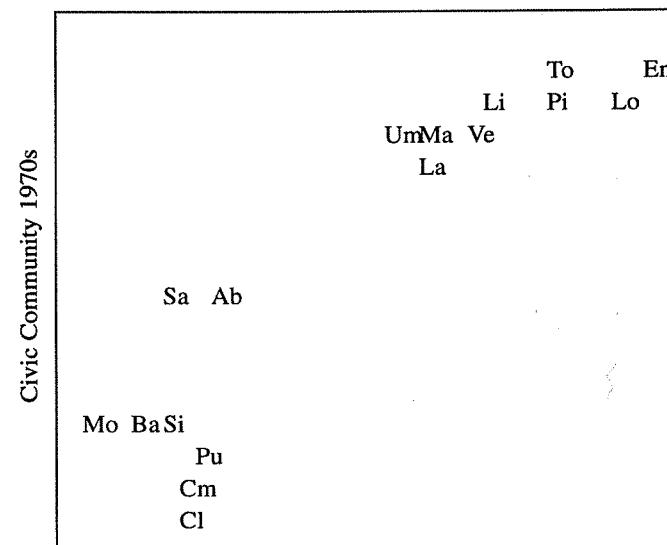
**FIGURE 5.2**  
Civic Traditions in the Italian Regions, 1860–1920



of social solidarity and civic mobilization, exactly there Italians today are the most thoroughly civic in their political and social life. And in these very regions public life was distinctively civic nearly a millennium ago, with an equally impressive flowering of community life, including tower societies, guilds, neighborhood associations, and other forms of civic engagement. The absence of adequate statistical records prevents us from demonstrating this longer continuity with the same quantitative precision that is possible for the more recent period, although Figure 5.1, Figure 5.2, and Figure 4.4 provide glimpses of this continuity in c. 1300, c. 1900, and c. 1970. In any event, the rituals performed at the Christmas Eve founding of that first cooperative in Altare in 1865 suggest that these historical continuities did not escape the participants themselves.

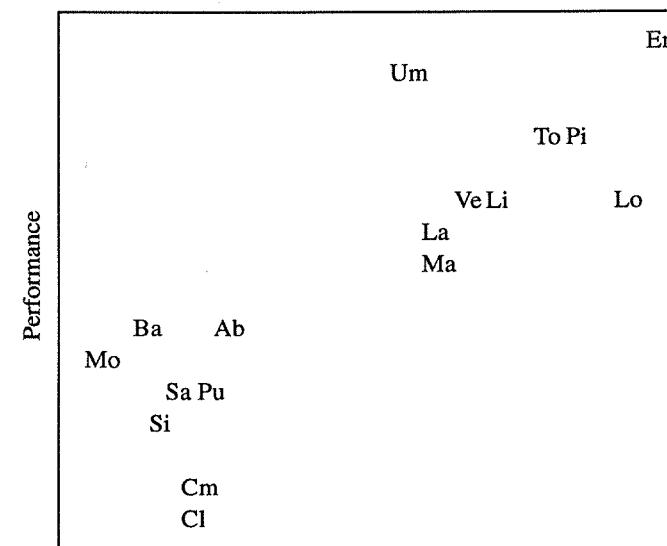
How important are these deep traditions of civic life for institutional performance today? Figure 5.4 presents the correlation between institutional performance in the 1980s and civic traditions in 1860–1920. The pattern is stark: One could have predicted the success or failure of regional government in Italy in the 1980s with extraordinary accuracy from patterns of civic engagement nearly a century earlier.<sup>133</sup>

**FIGURE 5.3**  
Civic Traditions and the Civic Community Today



Civic Traditions, 1860–1920  
Correlation:  $r = .93$

**FIGURE 5.4**  
Traditions of Civic Involvement, 1860–1920, and  
Institutional Performance, 1978–1985



Civic Traditions

133. *Ibid.*, 26.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CIVIC TRADITIONS

In quantitative social science, it is rare indeed to discover patterns as powerful—almost mesmerizing—as those we have just examined. An important omission from our argument, however, will already have occurred to the prudent reader. In contemporary Italy, the civic community is closely associated with levels of social and economic development. Generally speaking, regions today that are civic are also healthy, wealthy, and industrial. That could easily mean, a skeptic might suspect, that the civic community is merely epiphenomenal—that only economic well-being can sustain a culture of civic involvement. It is difficult today for poor, sickly peasants to engage in civic-minded participation, and so it must have been a century ago. Might not continuities in economic and social structure account for the apparent continuities in civic life? Perhaps the mesmerizing correlations are spurious. Economics matters, not civics.

The historical saga we have recounted casts some doubt on this claim, for the long-term patterns of continuity and change are not consistent with any simple economic determinism. In the first place, the emergence of communal republicanism does not seem to have been the consequence of unusual affluence. The level of economic development in northern Italy in that period was quite primitive, far less advanced than the Mezzogiorno today, and perhaps even less advanced than the South in that epoch.<sup>134</sup> As we have seen, the prosperity of the communal republics was arguably the consequence, as much as the cause, of the norms and networks of civic engagement.<sup>135</sup>

In the second place, civic differences between the North and South over this millennium appear to have been more stable than economic differences. The North-South economic gap seems to have waxed and waned and even reversed direction in several periods, especially in response to external developments. In the twelfth century the Norman kingdom was nearly as advanced as the North, but, with the advent of communal republicanism, the North (and especially the towns of the Center-North, the heartland of civic engagement) grew more rapidly for several centuries. Beginning in the fifteenth century, however, in the aftermath of pestilence, foreign invasion, shifts in world trading patterns, and other exogenous shocks, the North's advantage faded and perhaps disappeared entirely by the sixteenth century. Recall those sixteenth century migrants, fleeing the debilitated North in search of a better life in booming Naples. By contrast, although the cultural gap is hard to measure precisely across these centuries, we have encountered no evidence that at any point over these ten centuries the South was ever as civic in its norms and patterns of association as the North.

**TABLE 5.2**  
Civic Traditions and Socioeconomic Development

<i>Decade</i>	<i>Correlation (r) between Civic Traditions (1860–1920) and Measures of Socioeconomic Development (1870s–1970s)</i>		
	<i>Agricultural Share of Workforce</i>	<i>Industrial Share of Workforce</i>	<i>Infant Mortality</i>
1870s	-0.02	-0.15	-0.07
1880s	-0.22	0.14	-0.22
1890s	—	—	-0.26
1900s	-0.43	0.52	-0.20
1910s	-0.52	0.64	-0.44
1920s	-0.56	0.66	-0.58
1970s	-0.84	0.84	-0.67

The civic regions did not begin wealthier, and they have not always been wealthier, but so far as we can tell, they have remained steadfastly more civic since the eleventh century. These facts are hard to reconcile with the notion that civic engagement is simply a consequence of prosperity.

For the period since Unification, we can draw on more quantitative evidence to assess the notion that economic development is the cause or precondition for civic norms and networks. The first bit of statistical data contrary to simple economic determinism is this: the powerful contemporary correlation between economics and civics did not exist a century ago. We can demonstrate this notable fact with indicators both of industrialization (as measured by agricultural and industrial employment) and of social well-being (as measured by infant mortality), for which reliable data are available on the Italian regions over the last century. (Table 5.2 offers the relevant evidence.)

Throughout this period, economic structure and social well-being have become ever more closely aligned with the virtually unchanging patterns of civic involvement. Like a powerful magnetic field, civic conditions seem gradually but inexorably to have brought socioeconomic conditions into alignment, so that by the 1970s socioeconomic modernity is very closely correlated with the civic community.<sup>136</sup>

To appreciate this pattern, contrast two regions that at the turn of the century seemed in many respects comparable in terms of economic structure and social well-being. In 1901 Emilia-Romagna ranked just at the national median in terms of industrialization, with 65 percent of its workforce on the land and only 20 percent in factories. By way of com-

parison, Calabria was slightly more industrial than Emilia-Romagna (with 63 percent of its workforce in agriculture, 26 percent in industry). To be sure, Calabria's economy was "paleo-industrial," for the region's industry was primitive, and its citizens were poorer and less educated, while Emilian agriculture was relatively prosperous. On the other hand, Emilia-Romagna's infant mortality rate in the first decade of this century was worse than the national average, whereas Calabria's figure was slightly better than the national average, though still appalling in absolute terms.<sup>137</sup> Whatever the marginal socioeconomic differences between them, both were backward regions.

In terms of political participation and social solidarity, on the other hand, Emilia-Romagna was blessed at the turn of the century (as it remains today and as it apparently had been almost a millennium ago) with virtually the most civic culture in all of Italy. By contrast, Calabria was cursed (and still is) by perhaps the least civic of Italian regional cultures—feudal, fragmented, alienated, and isolated.

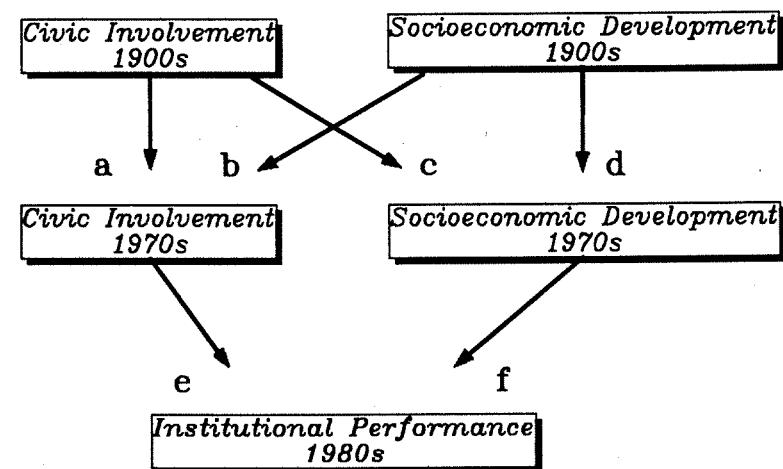
Over the next eight decades, a social and economic gap of remarkable proportions opened between the two regions. Between 1901 and 1977, the fraction of the Emilian workforce in industry doubled (from 20 percent to 39 percent), whereas the fraction of Calabria's workforce in industry actually declined over those eight decades (from 26 percent to 25 percent), the only region in all of Italy for which that was true. Thanks to advances in medicine and public health, infant mortality had fallen substantially throughout Italy, but Calabria had trailed well behind Emilia-Romagna.<sup>138</sup> By the 1980s, Emilia-Romagna, with one of the most dynamic economies in the world, was on its way to becoming the wealthiest region in Italy and among the most advanced in Europe, while Calabria was the poorest region in Italy and among the most backward in Europe. Among the eighty regions of the European Community, ranked by GDP per capita, Emilia-Romagna jumped from 45th to 17th place between 1970 and 1988, the biggest jump recorded by any region in Europe, while Calabria remained locked in last place throughout the period.<sup>139</sup>

This pattern of correlations raises an intriguing possibility: Perhaps regional traditions of civic involvement in the last century help account for contemporary differences in levels of development. In other words, perhaps civics helps to explain economics, rather than the reverse.

Despite the frailties of these historical statistics, we can exploit the available data to explore more directly the interdependencies between socioeconomic development and traditions of civic involvement.<sup>140</sup> One simple empirical test is to compare two sets of predictions, using the same set of independent variables in each case:

- Predicting level of economic development in the 1970s from development and civic involvement around 1900.

**FIGURE 5.5**  
Possible Effects among Civic Involvement, Socioeconomic Development, and Institutional Performance: Italy, 1900s–1980s



- Predicting civic involvement in the 1970s from the same earlier measures of development and civic involvement.

If the economic determinist is correct, economics at time one should predict civics at time two. If, on the other hand, patterns of civic involvement have economic consequences, then civics at time one should help to predict economics at time two. (In both cases, we need to control for the earlier levels of the dependent variable, since presumably the best single predictor of a variable at time two is that same variable at time one—the so-called "auto-regressive" effect.) In principle, of course, both effects might operate simultaneously, implying some reciprocal influence between civics and economics. Figure 5.5 illustrates the several possible causal paths.

Theories that give priority to socioeconomic structure imply that arrows *b* and *d* should be quite strong (especially *b*), whereas the theory that civics has socioeconomic consequences emphasizes arrows *a* and *c* (especially *c*). Both theories can be tested with pairs of multiple regressions, using civic traditions and a given socioeconomic variable as measured around 1900 to predict civic patterns and the same socioeconomic variable as measured in the 1970s.<sup>141</sup>

The results of this statistical horse race turn out to be straightforward and startling. In the first place, civic traditions (as measured in the 1860–1920 period) are a very powerful predictor of contemporary civic community, and (controlling for civic traditions) such indicators of socioeco-

nomic development as industrialization and public health have no impact whatsoever on civics. That is, arrow *a* is very strong and arrow *b* is uniformly nonexistent. When civics and socioeconomic structure were inconsistent at the turn of the century (a region that was civic, but relatively poor, rural, and sickly; or a region that was uncivic, but relatively wealthy, healthy, and industrial), there was no subsequent tendency for the civic traditions to be remolded to fit the “objective conditions.”<sup>142</sup>

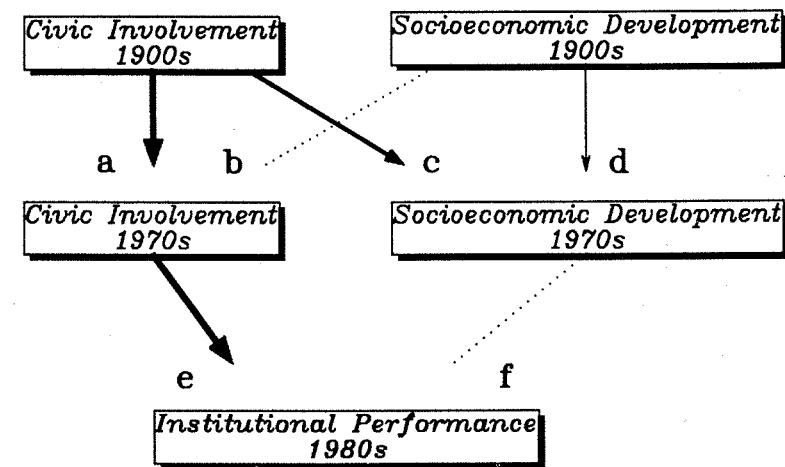
By contrast, civic traditions turn out to be a uniformly powerful predictor of present levels of socioeconomic development, even when we hold constant earlier levels of development. Consider each of our socioeconomic variables in turn.

The most direct measures of social structure and economic development are *agricultural* and *industrial employment*. These data clearly reflect the industrial revolution that swept over Italy during this century. Over the period from 1901 to 1977, the average fraction of the workforce engaged in industry rose from 19 percent to 34 percent, while the average fraction employed in agriculture across the twenty regions fell from 66 percent to 19 percent. Throughout this period the cross-regional differences were quite marked: In 1977, agricultural employment ranged from 5 percent in Lombardia to 43 percent in Molise, while industrial employment ranged from 22 percent in Molise to 54 percent in Lombardia. Over the period between 1901 and 1977, the rankings of the regions were modestly stable, with correlations of approximately  $r = .4$ ; conventionally, this figure would be interpreted as a measure of economic (or perhaps center-periphery) determinism.

But when we use both civic traditions and past socioeconomic development to predict present socioeconomic development, we discover that civics is actually a much better predictor of socioeconomic development than is development itself. For example, when predicting the proportion of a region’s workforce in agriculture in 1977, we are much better off knowing the cultural conditions of that region in 1860–1920 than the agricultural workforce of that region in 1901–1911. In fact, nineteenth-century civic traditions are such a powerful predictor of twentieth-century industrialization that when cultural traditions are held constant, there is simply *no correlation at all* between industrial employment in 1901–1911 and industrial employment in 1977. In other words, arrow *c* is quite strong and arrow *d* is quite weak.<sup>143</sup>

In the case of *public welfare*, the conclusion is identical: civic traditions, as measured in 1860–1920, predict infant mortality in the late 1970s much better than infant mortality in 1901–1910 does; in fact, holding civic culture constant, the correlation between infant mortality across those six decades is insignificant. In other words, for infant mortality, arrow *d* is negligible, while arrow *c* is rather strong.<sup>144</sup>

**FIGURE 5.6**  
Actual Effects among Civic Involvement, Socioeconomic Development, and Institutional Performance: Italy, 1900s–1980s



In summary, economics does not predict civics, but civics does predict economics, better indeed than economics itself.<sup>145</sup> Figure 5.6 synthesizes our findings. Arrow *b* (the effect of economics on civics) is nonexistent, while arrow *c* (the effect of civics on economics) is strong—stronger even than arrow *d*. Moreover, arrow *a* (civic continuity) is very strong, while arrow *d* (socioeconomic continuity) is generally weak. A region’s chances of achieving socioeconomic development during this century have depended less on its initial socioeconomic endowments than on its civic endowments. Insofar as we can judge from this simple analysis, the contemporary correlation between civics and economics reflects primarily the impact of civics on economics, not the reverse.<sup>146</sup>

Civic traditions have remarkable staying power. Moreover, as the discoveries of the previous chapter showed, it is contemporary civic engagement (arrow *e*), not socioeconomic development (arrow *f*), that directly affects the performance of regional government. We now see further evidence that that effect is not spurious. On the contrary, these results suggest, civic traditions may have powerful consequences for economic development and social welfare, as well as for institutional performance.

Union membership, we noted in the previous chapter, is best seen as a concomitant of civic engagement, rather than as merely a response to economic circumstance. This interpretation is strengthened by examining regional patterns of union membership just after the first World War.<sup>147</sup> Aggregate union membership rates in 1921 are very strongly correlated

with prior civic traditions ( $r = .84$ ). So strong is this link that, controlling for civic traditions, there is *no correlation at all* between industrialization and union membership. Union strength followed patterns of civic solidarity, rather than patterns of economic development.<sup>148</sup>

These unexpected, elemental links between civics and economics cast new light on the long-standing debate about the North-South development gap, not only within Italy but also globally. The widening gulf between North and South is the central issue of modern Italian history, and it is worth recalling the stark facts that have aroused such passion among scholars and activists. At Unification, neither the North nor the South had really been touched by the industrial revolution. As late as 1881, roughly 60 percent of Italians worked on the land (slightly *more* in the North), while fewer than 15 percent (slightly *more* in the South) worked in manufacturing, including cottage industry. However, northern farms were more productive, and thus per capita income was probably 15–20 percent higher in the North at the time of Unification. After 1896, however, industrialization began to move the North sharply ahead, whereas the South actually became less urban and less industrial between 1871 and 1911. Thus, by 1911 the North-South gap had widened appreciably: northern incomes were about 50 percent higher.<sup>149</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century the North-South gap has grown relentlessly, despite swings in world conditions (war and peace, the Great Depression and the postwar boom), fundamental constitutional changes (monarchy, Fascism, and parliamentary democracy), and great changes in economic policy (the Fascist attempt at autarky, European integration, and, not least, a massive program of public investments in the Mezzogiorno over the last forty years). Even though the South has experienced some modest, welcome development in recent decades, at the same time the North has enjoyed one of the most remarkable growth spurts in Western economic history, pulling further and further ahead of the South. By the mid-1980s, per capita income was more than 80 percent higher in the North.<sup>150</sup>

Few topics in Italian historiography have aroused such debate as this steadily increasing dualism—the so-called “Southern Question.” Conventional economic theory, in fact, predicts gradual convergence in levels of regional development within a single country, only heightening the puzzle of Italian dualism.<sup>151</sup> Many possible answers have been offered:

- Physical disadvantages of the South, including distance from markets, unfavorable terrain, and lack of natural resources.
- Misguided government policies, especially in the late nineteenth century, including, in particular,

(1) trade policy (first, free trade that killed off fledgling southern industry and later protection that encouraged northern industry);

(2) fiscal policy (high taxes on the South, and spending to benefit the North, on education, defense industries, and land reclamation—although by the end of the nineteenth century total taxes were proportionally no higher in the South<sup>152</sup> and the national government had already begun investing substantial sums in public works there); and

(3) industrial policy (which served northern interests by promoting an alliance between heavy industry and large banks).

- Market externalities, the “economics of agglomeration,” and “learning by doing” that magnified the North’s modest initial advantages.<sup>153</sup>
- The “moral poverty” and absence of human capital in the Mezzogiorno, along with the culture of patron-clientelism.<sup>154</sup>

Both the North-South gap in Italy, and the range of theories that have been offered to account for it, mirror the broader debate about development in the Third World. Why do so many countries remain underdeveloped: inadequate resources? government mistakes? center-periphery *dependencia*? market failures? “culture”? Precisely for that reason, studies of the Italian case have the potential to contribute importantly to our understanding of why many (but not all) Third World countries remain inextricably and inexplicably mired in poverty.

As Toniolo recently observed about the Italian debate, however, “this great flourishing of ideas and interpretations has not been supported—either then or later—by an adequate commitment to quantitative analysis. . . . Although the works dedicated to [the ‘southern question’] would fill an entire library, many of the economist’s questions as to the size and causes of Italian economic dualism . . . remain unanswered.”<sup>155</sup>

The historical record, both distant and recent, leads us (like others) to suspect that sociocultural factors are an important part of the explanation.<sup>156</sup> To be sure, any single-factor interpretation is surely wrong. Civic traditions alone did not trigger (nor, in that sense, “cause”) the North’s rapid and sustained economic progress over the last century; that takeoff was occasioned by changes in the broader national, international, and technological environment. On the other hand, civic traditions help explain why the North has been able to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries so much more effectively than the South.

How might this “macro” link between civics and economics be manifested at the “micro” level? Through what mechanisms might the norms and networks of the civic community contribute to economic prosperity? This key question merits more work (and we shall return to it in the next chapter), but some important insights are provided by an independent body of research carried out in recent years by Italian and American political economists. Arnaldo Bagnasco first called attention to the fact that, alongside the familiar “two Italies” of the northern industrial triangle and

the backward Mezzogiorno, existed a “third Italy,” based on a “diffuse economy”—small-scale, but technologically advanced, and highly productive.<sup>157</sup> Michael Piore and Charles Sabel extended this analysis, pointing to numerous examples in north-central Italy of craft-like “flexible specialization”—high-fashion textile firms around Prato, the Brescia mini-mill steel producers, the motorbike industry of Bologna, the ceramic tile makers of Sassuolo, and so on. Borrowing a concept from one of the founders of modern economics, Alfred Marshall, scholars have come to term such areas “industrial districts.”<sup>158</sup>

Among the distinguishing features of these decentralized, but integrated industrial districts is a seemingly contradictory combination of competition and cooperation. Firms compete vigorously for innovation in style and efficiency, while cooperating in administrative services, raw materials purchases, financing, and research. These networks of small firms combine low vertical integration and high horizontal integration, through extensive subcontracting and “putting out” of extra business to temporarily underemployed competitors. Active industrial associations provide administrative and even financial aid, while local government plays an active role in providing the necessary social infrastructure and services, such as professional training, information on export markets and world fashion trends, and so on. The result is a technologically advanced and highly flexible economic structure, which proved precisely the right recipe for competing in the fast-moving economic world of the 1970s and 1980s. Not surprisingly, these regions of flexible specialization have enjoyed above average prosperity during these two decades.<sup>159</sup>

At the heart of this peculiarly productive economic structure is a set of institutional mechanisms that enable competition to coexist with cooperation by forestalling opportunism. “A rich network of private economic associations and political organizations . . . have constructed an environment in which markets prosper by promoting cooperative behavior and by providing small firms with the infrastructural needs that they could not afford alone.”<sup>160</sup>

Social mobility is high in these industrial districts, as workers move from salaried jobs to self-employment and back again. Although labor unions are often well developed and strikes are not rare, the practice of “social compromise” encourages flexibility and innovation. Mutual assistance is common, and technical innovations diffuse quickly from firm to firm. The importance of cooperative horizontal networks among small firms and worker-owners contrasts with the salience of vertical authority and communication in large, conventional firms elsewhere in Italy. In short, by contrast with the “internal” economies of scale highlighted in classical theories of the firm, Marshallian industrial districts rely heavily on “external economies.” “Narrow economic considerations combine

with less precisely calculable ideas of collective advantage to create a sense of professional solidarity which is the backdrop and limit for competition between the firms.”<sup>161</sup>

Piore and Sabel conclude that “the cohesion of the industry rests on a more fundamental sense of community, of which the various institutional forms of cooperation are more the result than the cause. . . . Among the ironies of the resurgence of craft production is that its deployment of modern technology depends on its reinvigoration of affiliations that are associated with the preindustrial past.”<sup>162</sup>

Typically singled out as essential for the success of industrial districts, in Italy and beyond, are norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement. Networks facilitate flows of information about technological developments, about the creditworthiness of would-be entrepreneurs, about the reliability of individual workers, and so on. Innovation depends on “continual informal interaction in cafes and bars and in the street.” Social norms that forestall opportunism are so deeply internalized that the issue of opportunism at the expense of community obligation is said to arise less often here than in areas characterized by vertical and clientelistic networks. What is crucial about these small-firm industrial districts, conclude most observers, is mutual trust, social cooperation, and a well-developed sense of civic duty—in short, the hallmarks of the civic community.<sup>163</sup> It is no surprise to learn that these highly productive, small-scale industrial districts are concentrated in those very regions of north-central Italy that we have highlighted as centers of civic traditions, of the contemporary civic community, and of high-performance regional government.

We regard these discoveries about the cultural antecedents of economic development as provocative, rather than conclusive. It would be ridiculous to suppose that the civic traditions we have sketched in this chapter are the only—or even the most important—determinant of economic prosperity. In fact, as the British historical geographers John Langton and R.J. Morris point out, “Whether cultural inheritance or economic development is constructed to be an independent element will depend very much on the time-scale within which the historical process is conceived. It is obvious that they interact to change one another. There was no cause and effect but a dialectical process of reciprocation.”<sup>164</sup> Our bivariate model (Figure 5.6) is too simple to account for all of the factors that may influence regional economic progress, such as natural resources, convenience to major markets, and national economic policies. Much finer-grained studies (including studies at the subregional level) would be necessary to substantiate the broad historical argument we have sketched.

Nevertheless, the evidence of this chapter dramatizes the power of historical continuities to affect the odds of institutional success. Even

our simple findings imply that, to the extent that we have overlooked the “real” cause(s) of economic development (call that Factor X), then Factor X must be more closely correlated with civic traditions than with prior economic development. Once established, affluence may reinforce “civic-ness,” while poverty probably discourages its emergence, in an interlocked pair of vicious and virtuous circles. Our evidence argues, however, that the “economics → civics” loop in these interactions is not dominant. Civic norms and networks are not simply froth on the waves of economic progress.

During the last ten centuries—and particularly in the last several decades—Italy has undergone massive economic, social, political, and demographic change. Millions of Italians migrated from one region to another, more than nine million of them (or roughly one-fifth of the entire population) in the fifteen years after 1955.<sup>165</sup> During the first century after Unification, regions leapfrogged one another in the socioeconomic rankings. Regions with a relatively industrial economy in 1970 had not necessarily been the industrial regions a century earlier, and regions with good public health in 1970 had not been the healthier ones in 1870.

Despite this whirl of change, however, the regions characterized by civic involvement in the late twentieth century are almost precisely the same regions where cooperatives and cultural associations and mutual aid societies were most abundant in the nineteenth century, and where neighborhood associations and religious confraternities and guilds had contributed to the flourishing communal republics of the twelfth century. And although those civic regions were not especially advanced economically a century ago, they have steadily outpaced the less civic regions both in economic performance and (at least since the advent of regional government) in quality of government. The astonishing tensile strength of civic traditions testifies to the power of the past.

But *why* is the past so powerful? What virtuous circles in the North have preserved these traditions of civic engagement through centuries of radical social, economic, and political change? What vicious circles in the South have reproduced perennial exploitation and dependence? To address such questions we must think not merely in terms of cause and effect, but in terms of social equilibria. To that task we turn in the next chapter.