CHAPTER ONE

Sicilian Social Ideals in the Nineteenth Century

South Italians—including Sicilians—enjoy a curiously contradictory social reputation. Sometimes portrayed as fiercely competitive familists, they are deemed suspicious of outsiders—of the state or even of their own neighbors. Alternatively they are described as a passionately sociable people, always in the company of others. Skillful social architects, they build large, intricate kin groups, crime "syndicates," or "dense community networks," all seemingly with equal skill.[1]

It was Edward Banfield who opened the scholarly form of this debate about south Italian social character. In the 1950's Banfield called the residents of one south Italian town "amoral familists."[2] Because of their dedication to the interests of the nuclear family, these south Italians, according to Banfield, could not cooperate with others. Early critics accepted Banfield's label, but faulted him for describing familism as the cause rather than the consequence of grinding south Italian poverty. Others disputed the accuracy of the label itself. Banfield was accused of cultural blindness, of failing to recognize that south Italians have their own form of social morality. South Italians, these critics argued, are scarcely familistic; however, their social ties take the form of personal networks, rather than voluntary institutionalized association as in middle-class America.[3]

Banfield believed that Italians in the past were as familist as they are today, about that we know considerably less. The earliest anthropological study of Sicily, Charlotte Gower Chapman's *Milocca*, reflected field work completed in the 1920's.[4] This study and evidence from the nineteenth century do suggest, however, that Sicilian social relations have changed through time, so that contemporary anthropological accounts are of limited use to historians seeking information about immigrant backgrounds. Too much—mass migrations, two wars, fascism, and eighty years of economic change—has intervened.[5]

Except as they are deduceable from behavioral data (a tricky business, at best), the social values of southern Italians in the past remain elusive.

As long as the social ideals of the past remain hazy or unexplored, historians will experience difficulty in interpreting the social experiences of south Italian immigrants. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, Josef Barton and John Briggs all base their analyses of immigrant social patterns largely on the present-day anthropological debate.[6] Exploring the values, ideals and motives of ordinary people in the past is, of course, immensely complicated; sources are few,and they are often difficult to interpret. However, it is a necessary task, undertaken by this chapter, which examines Sicilian social ideals as reflected in a large collection of Sicilian proverbs gathered in the nineteenth century by Giuseppe Pitrè.[7]

Proverbs, like all folklore sources, must be used with some care. Folklore has an inherently conservative bias. It emerged as a field of study only when middle-class observers discovered with dismay that rural life was rapidly changing in character. In their efforts to collect and to preserve, folklorists often overemphasized and celebrated the differences between an organic peasant past and a decadent modern proletariat. In some hands, folklore became more a critique of modernism than a scientific study of society or culture.[8]

Unlike many folklorists, Giuseppe Pitrè was not overly interested in criticizing the social changes that he observed around him. Pitrè, a Palermo physician, became interested in Sicilian tales, customs and proverbs long before political unrest in the 1890's encouraged widespread and explicitly conservative interest in the "disappearing" Sicilian peasant. Compared to his colleague Salomone-Marino, Pitrè seemed a relatively sympathetic observer of the Sicilian peasant's effort to live in a rapidly changing economy. He did not, for example, indulge in bitter attacks on peasant political activism—as did Salomone-Marino and others.[9]

Pitrè's collection offers several other advantages for the student of past social values. Proverbs—"short, pithy saying[s] in frequent and widespread use"—express well-known facts, truths or lessons.[10] These lessons vary from society to society and through time, as Pitrè's comparisons of Sicilian and other proverb collections show. Pitrè collected proverbs from a variety of oral and written sources all over Sicily in the years preceding mass migration from the island. With more than 13,000 proverbs, the collection covers almost every imaginable aspect of Sicilian life, and its size guarantees that the collector had not simply selected those sentiments that matched his own evaluation of Sicilians and their culture. Pitrè did provide a lengthy introduction to his collection, and he did divide it into categories he considered logical. One can, however, ig-

nore Pitrè's editorial work. The proverbs, according to the editor of their most recent reprinting, provide an extraordinary and unique introduction to the values of ordinary people at the end of the nineteenth century.[11]

To use Pitrè's proverbs as a source for the study of Sicilian values required a systematic approach; haphazard selection would have proved extremely misleading. The first task was to identify all social and occupational categories used in the proverbs. The second was to summarize the social lessons expressed about each category. A third task was to interpret Pitrè's proverbs against the background of changes in Sicily's economy and society during the late nineteenth century.[12] Appendix A compiles proverbs in several key categories. To simplify documentation of the proverbs, they will be cited here by volume and page number.

Pitrè's proverbs describe social values rather unlike those of Banfield's amoral familists. Sicilians had no name for the family group that Banfield and others call the "nuclear family" of father, mother and children. Although the nuclear family was not without significance in Sicilian social and economic behavior (as I will show), Sicilians also strongly desired social ties to people outside this group and they had clear rules defining moral social behavior outside the nuclear family. They wanted close and harmonious social ties to their *casa* of close relatives. Under special conditions, they also sought ties to their more distant kin, called the *parenti.* However, unlike the south Italian immigrants described by Yans-McLaughlin, Sicilians in the nineteenth century did not value involvement with their *parenti* over involvement with friends or neighbors. Sicilians in their proverbs also made few and relatively simple class distinctions; they offered generally negative but somewhat contradictory advice about relations between the classes. Often, in fact, the proverbs offered apparently contradictory advice, but when viewed against the reality of social mobility in Sicily in the nineteenth century, many of these apparent contradictions and ambiguities begin to make perfect social sense.

Family and Familism

Sicilian proverbs about close blood ties—those between parents and children and among siblings—form the most detailed and voluminous category in Pitrè's collection. Clearly, these were unlike any other kind of social relations, and they were always described positively. Proverbs gave a picture of "nuclear family" ideals only slightly different from that in Yans—McLaughlin's *Family and Community.* Pitrè accurately summarized

his research on Sicilian families when he noted that they encompassed simultaneously principles of both matriarchy and patriarchy.[13] The father headed the family and guided it in its economic endeavors. All family members were expected to work for the good of the family and to cooperate at all times. This was necessary because the nuclear family, as owner of property, had its own "interests"—*i fatti sui*—which inevitably brought it into competition with other families. Proverbs emphasized further that the father must control the potentially dangerous sexuality of wives and daughters (II, "*Donna e matrimonio*"). But proverbs praising women as mothers and housekeepers also balanced this large group of violently misogynous proverbs. Mothers ran the household and arranged children's marriages. Sicilians believed, in fact, that a family with no wife/mother rapidly became poor [II, 65.)[14]

Whatever importance they granted the nuclear family, Sicilians were not familistic in their social ideals. They desired and valued ties to people outside their nuclear families. A number of desired social ties to others originated in the family cycle: siblings remained siblings and parents parents, even as individual children married and formed nuclear families of their own. This meant that every family valued ties to an intergeneration bilateral group of close kin. For a young married couple it included the parents of both man and wife and all their brothers and sisters, whether single or married. Several proverbs suggested that cooperation with the wife's family would remain particularly close (II, 216). Sicilians' term for the family, the *casa*, did not correspond neatly to our term "nuclear" or "conjugal" family, but referred to this lineal group of closest relatives.[15]

Beyond the *casa*, Sicilians recognized another category of blood relatives called the *parenti*. Proverbs had little to say about specific relations to aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, grandparents or grandchildren—less, for example, than they expressed about stepparents or in-laws. Instead, the proverbs evaluated all these more distant kin together. According to the proverbs' evaluation, the *parenti* differed but little from other social categories like friends (*amici*), neighbors (*vicini*) or godparents (*copare, parrini*). And proverbs about friendship, godparents and neighbors actually outnumbered those about the *parenti* (see Appendix A).

Sicilians evaluated all these social ties with great ambiguity. Most proverbs harshly criticized one or more, but a large minority offered praise in equally strong words. Apparently a friend, a neighbor, a godparent or a *parente* could be a very valuable person under some circumstances,

while at other times he was not to be trusted. "Good friends, good *parenti*—pity the family with neither" (III, 253). "A man's fortune is another man" (II, 274). "Keeping to yourself makes for a good neighborhood" (IV, 378). "Do nothing for your *parenti*; treat your neighbors like thorns, and don't go near your godparents" (I, 314). "Lose your money, lose your friends" (II, 251). As this last proverb suggests, all these social categories were often associated with material gain, money and gold; they described what anthropologists call "instrumental relationships." "If you have money, you will find your *parenti*" (II, 258). Proverbs treating two categories simultaneously typically linked friends and *parenti* ("The peasant, grown rich, recognizes neither friend nor kin," II, 431). The neighbor may have been a slightly different social category, perhaps because the neighbor, as described in the proverbs, often was female ("No matter how big the chicken, she needs a *vicina*," I, 251). And when proverbs explicitly compared two of these categories, they usually deprecated kin, even close ones: "Your neighbor is your real *parente*," (II, 221); "A friend nearby is more than a *parente* far away," (II, 90); "A good friend is worth more than one hundred brothers" (IV, 215). Of all ties outside the *casa*, friendship then seemed most valuable to Sicilians.

Occupation and Social Class

Sicilians also recognized and created a social hierarchy based on occupation and property ownership. The person who owned something, even if it were a mule, could sometimes be called *padrone* (*patruni* in dialect). *Padrone* also meant a person who worked as he pleased, as did an independent artisan, professional or entrepreneur. These simple distinctions produced a socio-economic hierarchy in which the landowner ranked higher than the nonowner, the rentier higher than the manual worker, and, among workers, the independent artisan ranked higher than those doing dirty and dependent work.

On this basis, the Miloccans Chapman studied in the early twentieth century divided society into roughly three classes of people; class distinctions based on occupation and property seemed equally simple in the nineteenth-century proverbs.[16] Ordinary Sicilians had many names only for the landowning rentier class: *signuri, cavaleri, galuntuomi*, or *cappeddi* (hats). They distinguished the merchant (a clever man, to be approached with caution) from the artisan, always respected as a *mastru* (master). (In doing so the proverbs ignored the fact that artisans and merchants were often the same men.) The remaining Sicilians, peasants

doing dirty and dependent work, were simply *viddani.* A very few proverbs acknowledged the existence of another kind of peasant, the landowning *burgisi.*

By contrast, government clerks in Sicilian town halls found Sicilian society far more complex. An 1896 electoral list from Sambuca di Sicilia categorized with loving detail both merchants (by the many products they sold) and artisans (by the many products they made).[17] Census takers and agricultural surveys distinguished among peasants by their complex contractual relations to the land—where the proverbs recognized only *viddani,* they saw *gabelloti, burgisi, enfiteuti, giornalieri,* and *annolori,* as well as other more specialized workers in particular types of agriculture (*pastori, fattori, massarioti, guardie campestre, giardinieri, ortolani,* etc.)[18] While local clerks and census takers recognized fine distinctions among peasants, they described the landowning rentier class as a unified group that they called *civile,* thus making a specific comparison between themselves and their peers and the "uncivilized" peasants.

Clerks and proverbs also described women's occupations—and again they described them differently. The civil records of Sambuca listed spinners, weavers, "workers," servants, tailoresses, needleworkers, peasants and midwives. Proverbs described only one female occupation—the disparaged servant woman, who appeared often as the producer of bastard children. And only communal records in the 1870's and 1880's listed many women as peasants, although we know from other sources that women did agricultural work, albeit in declining numbers by the end of the century.[19] Finally, the proverbs called housekeeping women by the term *massara.* This word had a male equivalent (*massaro*); it described not a particular kind of work but an attitude towards work—one of diligent application. Clerks and census-takers used instead the sex-specific term *casalinga* for the lower status woman while listing the wives and daughters of rentier men as *civile.*

No matter how it was described or divided into categories, the Sicilian class hierarchy was bottom heavy. Peasants—sharecroppers, day-laborers and shepherds (the *viddani* of Pitrè's proverbs)—constituted up to two-thirds of the population of many Sicilian towns. Proportions of landowning peasants varied considerably, from "very few" to "very many;" in 1901 they accounted for only 12 percent of Sicilian peasants.[20] Together with artisans and merchants (roughly 15 percent of the population of smaller towns), the families of landowning peasants formed a group intermediary between the *viddanu* majority and the *civile* minority (which rarely exceeded 10 percent of the population).

When they discussed the proper relationship between members of different classes, the proverbs collapsed all social distinctions into a simple one between "the rich" and "the poor." Clearly the *signuri/civili* were the rich, and the *viddani* majority were the poor. But where did the artisan or landowning peasant fit into this dichotomy? The proverbs gave no clear answer, although at least one proverb contrasted the financially cautious (and property-conscious) landowning peasant from the *viddanu*, who casually trusted in God to provide (IV, 233).

Once again, the proverbs about the proper relation of rich and poor offered somewhat contradictory lessons. They dwelt on the injustice of wealth: "The peasant sows and the owner reaps," (I, 264); "The poor feed the rich," (III, 268). Yet they also castigated the poor and admired the rich, "Don't bother having a peasant for your godparent" (I, 223). And they saw the rich and poor inevitably linked through mutual dependence, "Sooner or later even the rich need the poor," (I, 251).

The proverbs also discussed the patron-client tie that sometimes linked rich and poor.[21] The term *padrone* had yet a third meaning, for a patron was one who controlled the work of or "owned" the social loyalties of another person. (For this reason, English speakers usually translate "*padrone*" as "boss," although "boss" unlike "*padrone*" almost always implies employment.) Proverbs called the patron's client his *servu*, one who served. Use of the term *servu* pointed to the feudal origin of the patron-client tie.

Nevertheless, the patron-client tie was not clearly defined and positively valued, as it probably was under feudalism. According to the proverbs, a *padrone* or a *servu* could be a useful social asset, but more typically the relationship was fraught with perils. "The honest man is the patron to the *casa* of others" (II, 50). "The person who brings me something becomes my patron" (II, 336). "The *servu* needs patience, the patron prudence" (II, 381). "When the *servu* becomes patron, look out!" (II, 387). "Where the patron is greedy, the *servu* is a thief" (II, 388). In general, the proverbs implied that it was best to live without patronage for only "a good slave never lacked a patron" (II, 380).

Had Edward Banfield studied the proverbs of nineteenth-century Sicilians, he might have concluded that here, indeed, lived an exemplary group of "amoral familists." Did not their proverbs allow nuclear families to behave towards other precisely as they pleased? Not exactly. Contradictory social ideals actually shared a common social morality, one of social reciprocity. A moral social tie existed when it served the interests of all those involved, that is, when reciprocation was ongoing, with each partner giving and taking in roughly equal fashion. Reciprocity

was important in maintaining ties between *parenti* and between non-kin. "Where there is give and take, there is friendship" (I, 93); "Give and take maintains the *parentela*" (I, 93). Both rich and poor Sicilians had good reasons for sharing contradictory social ideals. With an appeal to the benefits of friendship or kinship, the poor or the rich family could attempt to instigate reciprocation, by offering to give and expecting to get. The poor family unable to reciprocate or the rich family unwilling to do so could justify its refusal—a refusal that could extend to kin as easily as to non-kin—through reference to any of a large number of proverbial warnings. Both sets of social lessons assumed that usefulness and reciprocity defined a moral social tie. When viewed against a background of economic change and considerable social mobility in Sicily at the end of the nineteenth century, the competitive and cooperative social ideals expressed in the proverbs appear to complement rather than contradict one another.

The Social Origins of Conflicting Ideals

The social ideals of Sicilians at the end of the nineteenth century originated in agricultural development and the related dynamics of an increasingly complex hierarchy of social classes. Traditionally, Sicily produced wheat to export. At least since the Middle Ages, feudal owners of large estates (*latifondi*) and, later, their lessee-managers (*gabelloti*) supervised grain cultivation and pasturing by a peasant work force of sharecroppers and day laborers. In the 1830's and again in the 1860's, land reforms created a new class of landowners on the island.[22] *Civili* and growing numbers of peasant landowners continued to grow wheat, but they also extended the cultivation of grapes and fruit and nut trees. One writer estimated that between 1860 and 1880 alone, acreage cultivated in grapes tripled.[23]

The end of feudalism, the emergence of new landowning classes and the extension of new forms of cultivation led to a century of intense competition for land, for material goods and for social status in Sicily.[24] *Civili*, who had initially succeeded in purchasing church and feudal lands, attempted throughout the century to consolidate their tenuous social position. They simultaneously differentiated themselves from their former peers, the mass of poorer peasants, and sought acceptance by the old impoverished aristocracy. To do so they imitated the aristocratic practice of *amore della robba*—ostentatious display and conspicuous consumption.[25]

Like their feudal predecessors, *civili* abandoned practical agricultural pursuits to become rentiers; in doing so, they leased out their lands, continually tempting the peasant majority to compete with each other in the hopes of following the *civile* path to landownership and improved social status. This meant that *civili* represented both a new group of oppressors (whose common origins made them even more intolerable to their former peers) and galling proof that social mobility was possible. Landowning peasants, the *burgisi*, completed that proof. Peasants in the nineteenth century periodically joined together spontaneously to attack their *civile* oppressors; they also competed viciously with their peers in efforts to become *civili*. Little wonder, then, that proverbs reported conflicting evaluations of class relationships and often negative sentiments about cooperation.

However, with the desire to compete grew a related need to cooperate. A family literally could not survive economically without carefully limited cooperation with others. *Civile* employers needed employees; shepherds and peasants needed agricultural contracts or wages; artisans needed purchasers. No bureaucracy or formalized ties arranged employment and trade. To survive, every family—rich and poor—sought information from others about jobs, property, deaths and changes in fortune. In short, every family needed to gossip. "Four eyes," a proverb reminded, "see more than two" (I, 299). Competition itself provided the justification for limited types of cooperation. Originating in a nuclear family's desire to improve economically, the management of social cooperation became the responsibility of the father as the head of the family.

In turn, Sicilians transformed cooperative efforts into the basis for a new form of competition, a competition for "honor" or "respect."[26] Honor first accrued to the *casa* of persons publically demonstrating proper fulfillment of their *casa* family roles, but also to families that succeeded in establishing moral (that is, useful and reciprocal) social ties to others. The bigger the network of friends, *parenti* or neighbors, the more respect the family enjoyed. Respect was a form of social judgment, and largely a product of gossip, so competition for respect itself then encouraged families to try to build social ties based on the exchange of information about the moral and social behavior of others. In this case too "four eyes saw more than two." In a very real sense respect became a resource, not terribly different from property. That, in fact, was how proverbs described it: "A man with credit, also has honor" (IV, 220). "Honor is worth more than money" (I,207). And, like any other possession, honor could also be lost (IV, 151).

In sum, nineteenth-century Sicilians were not amoral familists; Banfield was wrong in his historical reasoning. They did, however, face huge obstacles, some of them environmental, in achieving their social ideals. Many never succeeded in building a network reaching much beyond the *casa*—in that respect alone they resembled the amoral familists that Banfield described. Many Sicilians in the nineteenth century hoped to escape restraints imposed on them by emigrating. When they emigrated they set into motion a process that would transform not just their social relationships to others, but their social ideals as well.

Sicily itself did not remain static as the emigrants left. Competition through cooperation and the desire to be respected seem to have grown in importance since the nineteenth century, and to have been accompanied by an increasingly positive evaluation of kinship and friendship among Sicilians. Jane and Peter Schneider, reporting on fieldwork in present-day western Sicily, describe friendship as one of the area's most important cultural themes; Jeremy Boissevain also found close dedication to the *parenti*, including distant second cousins.[27] A century of emigration and gradual but real improvement in Sicilian living standards contributed to these changes by enabling almost all Sicilians to participate in social reciprocation, exchanging not just gossip but gifts and hospitality. Since the period of mass emigration, the usefulness of patronage also grew, as a means of access to the growing bureaucracies of the nation state—the school, the health or welfare system—and as a form of political organization.[28] Patronage probably became increasingly acceptable culturally during these years, too.

New York's Sicilians shared with nonemigrants a similar base in Sicilian social ideals and in the obstacles faced in achieving those ideals. Both groups of Sicilians responded to these restraints. Neither immigrants nor nonmigrating Sicilians maintained unchanged the social ideals of the past. For that reason the two groups should not be compared as if today's Sicilians were the brothers and sisters of yesterday's immigrants. Both immigrants and Sicilians departed from their shared roots, but they took somewhat different paths. The next chapters examine the shared roots and the divergent immigrant path.