# *Peasant Strategies for Survival in Northern Italy, XVI-XVII Centuries*

**Domenico Sella**
University of Wisconsin - Madison

In the last thirty years or so economic historians who have attempted to calculate the incomes and the subsistence needs of the 'labouring poor' in pre-industrial Europe have discovered that many urban and rural workers could not have survived on the meagre earnings of only one occupation (whether farming, handicraft industry, or construction), but in order to make ends meet had to adopt various strategies, such as holding a second job, shifting from one occupation to another at different times of the year, resorting to temporary migration, depending on public charity (when available) or on begging and even petty crime. In short, they had to strive as best they could in what has been aptly called an 'economy of makeshifts'.[1]

The purpose of this essay is to add to this line of inquiry by focusing on the rural population of that part of Italy that lies between the Alps to the north and the Apennines to the south and is also known as the Po valley from the major river that runs from east to west through its whole length. It is a region of great geological diversity. Within its borders one can identify three distinct zones: a highly fertile, irrigated plain; a dry plain gradually blending into the hills up to elevations of 500 metres above sea level; and a mountain zone where soils suitable for farming are few and far between. In the late Middle Ages, and increasingly so in early modern times, most of the low plain had been carved up into large estates owned by urban elites and had specialized in growing commercial

[1] Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm, "An Introduction", *Household Strategies for Survival, 1600-2000: Fission, Faction and Cooperation* ed. by them as Supplement 8 of *International Review of Social History*, (2000), pp. 1-17. .

crops such as wheat, rice, flax and hemp as well as in large-scale dairy farming; in the high, dry plain and the hills, on the other hand, absentee-owned estates were smaller in size and on them arable fields were interspersed with vineyards and mulberry trees; lastly, and in sharp contrast to the other two zones, in the mountains and valleys what little cultivable soil was available was owned in small plots by the local peasantry and was used to grow inferior cereal crops (rye, oats and millet) for local consumption, while the rest of the land, whether forest or pasture, was held in common.[2]

Regardless of where they happened to be living, the peasants of the Po valley had one thing in common: their poverty, in the sense that, by and large, their work as agriculturists could not, by itself, ensure a livelihood for them and their families. The evidence on this point is inevitably fragmentary and hard to quantify, yet sufficient for conveying the precarious conditions in which most rural people lived.

Consider first the case of those who lived and worked on the large estates of the plain as day-labourers (*braccianti*). Two studies of their conditions in the area around Pavia in the late 1590s have shown that, just to buy enough food for himself, a day-labourer needed a minimum of 183 Milanese lire a year (a very modest sum of money when compared to the 350 lire required to provide a nutritious, though by no means extravagant, diet for one student per year at the local university). At the current wage-rate of 15 soldi (0.75 lire) per day a labourer would have had to find paid work for 255 days in the year – an unattainable goal, not only on account of the number of days (Sundays and some forty feast days) when all work was suspended, but also because in winter most farm work came to standstill.[3] An official ruling of the time was quite specific on this point: day-labourers could expect to find paid employment

[2] A detailed description is provided by Vittorio Beonio-Brocchieri, "*Piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo.*" *Famiglie e mestieri nel Ducato di Milano in età spagnola*, (Milan 2000), pp. 64-85.

[3] Carlo M. Cipolla, "Prezzi, salari e teoria dei salari in Lombardia alla fine del Cinquecento"; and Cipolla with Giuseppe Aleati, "Contributo alla storia dei consumi e del costo della vita in Lombardia agli inizi dell'età moderna", in his *Saggi di storia economica e sociale*, (Bologna 1988) pp. 113-24 and 87-112 respectively.

on 180 days in a year at most, and at the average rate of 18 soldi a day, could earn a total of 162 lire – again, well below the estimated cost of food alone.[4] To make a grim situation even worse, our source went on to say, most workers have to pay rent "as most of them do not own a house, must buy clothes and pay taxes (...), all of which is more than a day-labourer can earn." And if, as was normally the case, the man had wife and children, things were even worse, even though they all pitched in with some sort of paid work: "women (it was pointed out) are by law paid half as much as men";[5] as for youngsters," if they are employed in jobs suitable to their age, their earnings do not even cover the cost of their sustenance."[6]

A first line of defence against poverty consisted in controlling the size of the household. This is borne out by comparing the size and structure of families in two villages of the plain in the late XVI century.[7] On one side were the families of tenant farmers (*massari*), that is peasants who were relatively well-off in that they owned a heavy plough and a team of oxen and were thus capable of leasing a substantial acreage from a local landowner; on the other side, were the far more numerous day-labourers who worked for wages. Households in the former group were either extended or multiple with an average size of fifteen individuals; in the latter group households were nuclear and their average size stood at a mere three – a clear indication that tenant farmers had an interest in maximizing the size of the labour force by keeping their siblings and children (whether married or not) on the farm; by contrast, day-labourers, who no doubt lived in miserable, cramped quarters and, as we have seen, struggled to make ends meet, had no choice but to send their children

[4] Archivio di Stato di Milano (henceforth: ASM), *Censo P.A.*, 312, "Progetto del Conte di Prass", p. 61 quotes a 1562 ruling by the Senate of Milan.

[5] Quotations in Cipolla, "Prezzi, salari e teoria dei salari", pp. 118 and 121.

[6] ASM, *Censo P.A.*, 312, "Progetto del Conte di Prass", p. 61.

[7] Domenico Sella, "Profilo demografico e sociale di un comune rurale lombardo: Balsamo nel 1597" in *Studi in memoria di Luigi Dal Pane*, (Bologna 1982), pp. 333-44, and "Famiglie contadine alle porte di Milano: la Pieve di Mezzate nel 1574" in *Studi in onore di Antonio Petino*, vol.1, (Catania 1986), pp.145-53; also Beonio-Brocchieri, *"Piazza universale"*, pp. 137-47.

(even at the very young age of twelve) "off into the world (...) to learn a trade (...) and also to earn enough money to support themselves and to send something back to their families."[8]

Another way of coping was for the day-labourers of the plain to cultivate in their spare time a small plot of land on the outskirts of the large estates – as was done by the man who declared to a government official: "I work a little bit of land which I own, and I also lease land owned by others".[9] How many of them could do so is hard to say, but we know that peasant-owned acreage (*perticato rurale*), while nearly non-existent in the irrigated plain south of Milan, in other parts of the plain represented between 13 and 25 percent of total acreage.[10] Combining work on a small plot with paid work on a large estate could thus help – and so could a non-farming activity whenever the demand for wage labour in the fields was slack. For peasants who lived near a river or a lake – a not uncommon occurrence in the Po valley — fishing and the sale of their catch in a nearby town could provide a precious supplement to their income: as one of them who lived near the Ticino river put it, "I also work as a fishmonger and sell fish in Milan."[11] Further north, near lake Lugano, it was noted that while "all the local inhabitants own a little parcel of land," their main source of income was fishing.[12] In the countryside near Bologna, where hemp was a major crop (to the tune of 10-12 million pounds a year), peasants combined work in the fields with the preparation of hemp thread — in total disregard, one should add, of the legislation requiring all raw hemp to be brought to the city there to be processed by city artisans. Additionally, peasant households in the area engaged during their free time in the manufacture of hats made of thin willow shavings and widely

[8] Quotation from a 1722 document in Raul Merzario, *Il capitalismo nelle montagne. Strategie famigliari nella prima fase di industrializzazione nel Comasco,* (Bologna 1989), pp. 48-9.

[9] ASM, *Feudi Camerali* (henceforth *F.C.*), 157/3, 13 May 1717.

[10] Enrico Roveda, "Piccola e grande proprietà nella pianura lombarda fra '400 e '500" in *Rapporti tra proprietà, impresa e mano d'opera nell'agricoltura italiana dal IX secolo all'Unità,* (Verona 1984), pp. 74-5.

[11] ASM, *F.C.*, 564/2, 20 June 1674.

[12] ASM, *F.C.*, 60, 30 March 1633; similar instances in *F.C.*, 130, 414, and 516.

exported as far as to England. At the close of the sixteenth century hat making, under the putting-out system, was said to employ "thousands of wretched poor who (...) labour all night long in their stables."[13]

Conditions may have been somewhat better in the hill zone where absentee-owned estates were smaller and, as such, within the reach of a larger number of would-be tenants, the more easily because the latter did not have to provide the heavy plough with its team of draft animals as required in the irrigated plain, but could till the soil with the less expensive light plough pulled by a donkey or a man; besides, the mix of arable and tree crops typical of the hills zone reduced the risk of crop failures which beset the peasantry whenever monoculture was practised, as it was to a large extent in the irrigated plain. The evidence, however, is still too scant for drawing firm conclusions about the hill zone.

We are far better informed about the mountain zone. There the yield of the soil was generally recognized as being insufficient for meeting even the minimal nutritional needs of its owners and their families. The gap between locally-produced food and mouths to feed was expressed at the time in terms of the number of months in the year during which the local grain harvest covered local demand: three months in the valleys north of Bergamo;[14] a mere two months in the Valsassina east of lake Como;[15] two to three months at best on the rugged coast east of Genoa.[16] About the "sterile mountains" between lake Como and lake Lugano it was reported that "if they (the local population) want to eat, they have to go to a market town to fetch grain, for in this area the grain harvest is not sufficient even for one month; it is true, though, that one hundred bushels of white chestnuts can be harvested here and these help the poor a little."[17]

[13] Carlo Poni and Silvio Franzoni, "L'economia di sussistenza della famiglia contadina" *in Cultura popolare nell'Emilia Romagna*, vol. 3, (Milan 1979), pp. 13-6.
[14] Bortolo Belotti, *Storia di Bergamo e dei Bergamaschi, vol. 2,* (Milan 1940), p.264.
[15] Beonio Brocchieri, *"Piazza universale"*, p. 66.
[16] Osvaldo Raggio, "Social relations and control of resources in an area of transit: eastern Liguria, XVI-XVII centuries" in *Domestic Strategies: Work and Family in France and Italy, 1600-1800,* (Cambridge-Paris 1991), p. 21. The author points out that the grain deficit was covered in part with exports of olive oil to the Po valley.
[17] ASM, *F.C.*, 442/9, 21 July 1676.

Under the circumstances, then, the peasantry of the mountain zone had no choice but to find other sources of income, in the form of proto-industry, if they were to survive at all. In areas endowed with iron ores and ample forest resources such as the Camonica, Trompia and Scalve valleys north of Brescia (then part of the Venetian Republic) iron mining and metallurgy provided the solution and, indeed, represented the mainstay of the local economy. In those valleys, we are told, "everyone owns some parcel of land", but "those who cannot survive on the yield of their own land, escape indigence by other industrious and honorable means"[18] – and these were mining as well as metallurgy, notably the production of farming implements and, in Val Trompia, of common service firearms which, in an age punctuated by wars, found ample markets not only within the Venetian Republic, but in other Italian states as well as in Switzerland and Germany. And the quantities of firearms involved were impressive and ran into the tens of thousand.[19] Two orders placed by the Venetian government with the gun makers of Valtrompia provide a good illustration of their productive capacity: in 1646, at a time when Venice was at war with the Ottoman Empire, the government instructed them "to produce 20,000 gun barrels within four or five months, and to deliver them at the rate of 4-5,000 per month"; a few months later another order came from Venice for another 10,000 barrels.[20] In light of the fact that the demand for firearms for military use inevitably fluctuated from peacetime to wartime, the rural location of the industry no doubt contributed to its success, for subsistence farming could provide a source of livelihood, however modest, when furnaces and forges were idled. In Valsassina, too, iron mining and metallurgy thrived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, producing hardware for civilian rather than military

[18] G. Brunelli, *Delle naturali qualità e costumi di Val Camonica* (1698) reprinted in *La Valcamonica nel Seicento* ed. R. Putelli, (Breno 1918), p. 33.

[19] An excellent study of the industry is provided by Carlo Maria Belfanti, "A chain of skills: the production cycle of firearms manufacture in the Brescia area from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century" in *Guilds, Markets, and Work Regulations in Italy, XVI-XIV Centuries* ed. Alberto Guenzi, Paola Massa and Fausto Piola Caselli, (Aldershot 1998), pp. 266-83.

[20] Archivio di Stato di Venezia, *Senato Terra*, reg. 133, on 23 October 1646 and 23 February 1647.

use.[21] To be sure, the iron industry there experienced a major setback in the 1630s as a result of the devastation inflicted by an invading French army led by the Duke of Rohan, but it quickly recovered: a 1647 memorandum stated that "two thirds of [the inhabitants of the] valley are employed" in iron mining and metallurgy.[22]

In areas that were not endowed with iron resources, yet were equally short of good farmland, other things could help. In 1630 in the village of Cervo on the largely barren coast west of Genoa as many as two thirds of adult males were reported absent during the summer months as they were employed by local merchants to gather coral off the coast of Sardinia.[23] In Cervia on the Adriatic coast south of Ravenna it was the salt marshes (with annual outputs of nearly 25,000 tons) that provided the local peasantry with employment during part of the year.[24] Another instance of rural labour employed in proto-industrial work is that of Val Gandino north of Bergamo. The valley was described in 1596 as "very barren (...) for it yields wheat, millet, chestnuts and wine sufficient for only three months in the year." But in a string of small villages, it was further reported, "about 15,000 bolts of cloth are produced and exported every year to Germany, Hungary, the Kingdom of Naples, the March of Ancona and other places,"[25] and one should add that by 1700 cloth production had nearly doubled.[26]

The list of rural industries could be prolonged to include the extraction and processing of limestone around Lake Maggiore,[27] silk textiles in the

[21] Armando Frumento, *Imprese lombarde nella storia della siderurgia italiana*, vol. 2, *Il ferro milanese tra il1450 e il 1796*, (Milan 1963), pp. 103 and 143.
[22] ASM, *F.C.*, 616/4, 1647 printed memorandum.
[23] Edoardo Grendi, 'Il sistema politico di una comunità ligure: Cervo fra Cinquecento e Seicento', *Quaderni Storici*, 16, no. 46 (1981), p. 105.
[24] Cesarina Casanova, 'Il sale: risorsa e svantaggio. L'evoluzione politico-sociale di una città "camerale" in *Storia di Cervia*, vol. 3/1, *L'età moderna* as. Dante Bolognesi and Angelo Turchini, (Rimini 2001), pp. 166-77; and in the same vol. Dante Bolognesi, 'Il grano e il sale. L'economia bipolare di Cervia nell'età moderna', pp. 275-83.
[25] Giovanni Da Lezze, *Descrizione di Bergamo e suo territorio, 1596* ed. Vincenzo Marchetti and Lelio Pagani, (Bergamo 1988), p. 322.
[26] Walter Panciera, 'Il lanificio bergamasco nel XVII secolo: lavoro, consumi e mercati' in *Storia economica e sociale di Bergamo. Il tempo della Serenissima*, (Bergamo 2000), pp. 100-7.
[27] ASM, *F.C.*, 303/6, 20 February 1588.

vicinity of Trent,[28] silver and copper mining and metallurgy in the mountains north of Vicenza,[29] and paper making in a number of villages on the largely sterile Genoa coast where the number of paper mills rose from forty around 1600 to nearly three times as many a century later, with most production being exported mainly to Spain and her colonies at the rate, by the late seventeenth century, of 200,000 reams a year.[30]

In the end, however, for countless peasants who lived in the inhospitable and harsh environment of the mountains the only strategy for survival was migration. In general it was the men who migrated, mostly in a seasonal pattern, while the migrant's wife and children stayed behind to take care of the house and of what little land they owned and cherished as something that ensured a bare minimum in terms of shelter, sustenance and community support.

Needless to say, peasant migration presented no uniform pattern. On the one hand it involved footloose individuals who moved from place to place plying whatever skill they possessed. Such were the tinkers, like the one described in a government report from Casalmaggiore, a market town on the Po: "there is a tinker who works now in one locality now in another; his home is the Valmaggia [north of Locarno in Swiss territory] and no one knows whether he will ever settle down here."[31] Valle d'Aosta, for its part, was well known as the source of itinerant "charcoal makers, tinkers and chimney sweeps, who, due to the sterility of that valley, earn their bread elsewhere."[32] In the Vallassina some men left their homes to work here and there *(per il mondo)* as wool spinners, only to return to their native village for a few weeks in winter and again at harvest time.[33]

[28] Domenico Sella, *Commerci e industrie a Venezia nel secolo XVII,* (Venice-Rome 1961), pp. 80-1.
[29] Raffaello Vergani, *Miniere e società nella montagna del passato. Alpi venete, secoli XIII-XIX,* (Verona 2003), especially chapter 8.
[30] Manlio Calegari, *La manifattura genovese della carta (sec. XVI-XVIII),* (Genoa 1986), pp. 51, 62, 118, 121. On exports to Spain, Albert Girard, *Le commerce français à Seville et Cadix aux temps des Habsbourgs,* (Paris 1932), p. 385.
[31] ASM, *F.C.* 154, 4 October 1649.
[32] Francesco Agostino Della Chiesa, *Relazione dello stato presente del Piemonte, esattamente ristampata secondo l'edizione del 1635,* (Turin 1777), p. 63.
[33] Merzario, *Il capitalismo nelle montagne,* p. 60.

Peddlers, from various parts of the Alps, even as far as the French Dauphiné, were a common sight in town and country alike selling trinkets and cutlery,[34] while from Valsesia (the valley that leads up the Monte Rosa massif) came most of the cobblers operating in XVI century Milan where they were held in contempt as parasites who, "after earning plenty [of money], go back to their village loaded with cash" and were resented by the shoemakers' guild who accused them of encroaching on their turf by making shoes from scratch rather than just repairing them as the law of the city required.[35]

Unskilled or semi-skilled men, too, migrated to the plain in search of odd jobs. Valdossola, the valley that runs from lake Maggiore to the Swiss Alps, is a case in point. According to a contemporary source "its utter poverty can be neither explained nor understood unless one has seen it... It produces enough food for only two months of the year and its inhabitants are forced by the sterility of their native land (*patria*) to wander abroad in order to earn, by stint of the basest manual jobs, the wherewithal for themselves and their wives and children back home, thus compensating with their toil and with the money earned abroad the excessive scarcity of nature."[36] Similarly, migrants from the Bergamasque valleys flocked to Venice to work as porters (*facchini*) and most likely as stevedores in the city's harbour.[37] At any rate their low status as well as their determination to bring something back to their families caught the attention of the XVII century author of an encyclopedia of "all the occupations of the world" when he portrayed those migrants "born in the Bergamasque mountains" as being "of low and base condition... and sent away from their valley for the benefit of the whole world which uses them as asses and mules"; and he went on to call them "misers" who

[34] Bruno Caizzi, "Le classi sociali nella vita milanese" in *Storia di Milano*, vol. 11 (Milan, 1958), pp. 371-3.

[35] Quotation in Elisabetta Merlo, *Le corporazioni. Conflitti e soppressioni a Milano tra Sei e Settecento*, (Milan 1996), p. 44. For similar conflicts between immigrant cobblers and native shoemakers in Mantua see Carlo Marco Belfanti, *Mestieri e forestieri. Immigrazione ed economia urbana a Mantova fra Sei e Settecento*, (Milan 1994), pp. 103-10.

[36] ASM, *Censo*, P.A., 311, 18 September 1711.

[37] Andrea Zannini, 'Flussi d'immigrazione e strutture sociali urbane. Il caso dei bergamaschi a Venezia', *Bollettino di Demografia Storica*, 19 (1993), pp. 207-15.

toiled all year "in order to bring back to their wives what little money they manage to save."[38]

Transhumance was another form of migration from the mountains to the plain and back. From the Apennines shepherds and cattlemen drove their animals to the lowlands of Tuscany, the Maremma, there to spend the winter months.[39] On the high Asiago plateau north of Vicenza, where sheep herding represented a major source of income for nearly 1,500 peasant families, transhumance was a necessity as well, for the plateau's elevation (800 to 1,200 meters) made it imperative to drive the sheep to the plain during winter.[40] And much the same held true of many other localities at similar elevations: of one of them (Valtorta, some 50 km north of Bergamo) it was reported that its men "spend the winter in the Lombard plain because pastures are available there in that season"[41] as they most certainly were not back home.

Lastly, some young men found temporary relief from a life of poverty in military service. Admittedly, little research has been conducted on the subject, but it is safe to say that in an age when Europe in general and the Italian peninsula in particular were repeatedly engulfed in war, the demand for soldiers must have been quite high much of the time. The Spanish-ruled State of Milan, in particular, was certainly viewed in Madrid as a key source of recruits for its armies, so much so that when a plague devastated the Po valley in 1630-1 killing about a third of its entire population, the Spanish governor in Milan hastened to write to his king that "the plague has left [this province] so reduced in population that it is impossible to raise any levies."[42] How many young men answered the call of the army recruiter we do not know, but we do know that some of them were peasants like the young man who had left his native village

[38] Quotation in Ugo Tucci, "I mestieri nella 'Piazza universale' del Garzoni" in *Studi in memoria di Luigi Dal Pane*, p. 331.

[39] Poni and Franzoni, "L'economia di sussistenza", p. 20.

[40] Walter Panciera, "La transumanza nella pianura veneta (secoli XVI-XVIII)" in *Le migrazioni in Europa, secoli XIII-XVIII* ed. Simonetta Cavaciocchi, (Florence 1994), pp. 371-2.

[41] V. Formaleoni, *Descrizione topografica e storica del bergamasco*, Part 2, (Venice 1777), p. 50.

[42] Quotation in Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1567-1659. The Logistics of Spanish Victory and Defeat in the Low Countries*, (Cambridge 1975), p. 44n.

in search of work but had found none and, for lack of better alternatives, had decide to enlist. In 1684 he wrote a poignant letter to his family: "I cannot send you any money nor have I any even for myself and so I am about to become a soldier as I have had no luck in my trade."[43]

It may surprise us, at first sight, to find among the migrants highly skilled and often literate individuals[44], but that, in fact, was often the case.[45] They left their native village in hierarchically structured teams led by a foreman or master and they headed for a specific destination. A prime example of this is provided by the migration of construction workers, with bricklayers and stonecutters at the low end of the hierarchy and plasterers at the top, who came from the Alpine valleys to the towns and cities of the Po valley, but also to those of central and southern Italy. The distance of their place of origin from their destination (roughly 100 km to Milan or Venice, five times as far to Rome, and close to 1,000 km by land or sea to Palermo) largely determined the length of their absence from home. In the case of relatively short distances absence was measured in months rather than years; longer distances, on the other hand, inevitably implied years away from home.[46]

[43] Quotation in Raul Merzario, *Adamocrazia. Famiglie di emigranti in una regione alpina (Svizzera italiana, XVIII secolo)*, (Bologna 2000), p. 45.

[44] On the relatively high degree of literacy in the Alpine valleys, in sharp contrast to conditions in the plain, see Xenio Toscani, *Scuole e alfabetismo nello Stato di Milano da Carlo Borromeo alla Rivoluzione*, (Brescia 1993), pp. 102-3; literacy was considered necessary especially in the building trades (Marina Cavallera, "Imprenditori e maestranze: aspetti della mobilità nell'area prealpina del Verbano durante il secolo XVIII" in *Mobilità imprenditoriale e del lavoro nelle Alpi in età moderna e contemporanea* ed. G.L. Fontana, A.Leonardi and L. Trezzi, (Milan 1998), p. 97.

[45] On the coexistence of migration and proto-industry see Laurence Fontaine, 'Gli studi sulla mobilità in Europa nell'età moderna: problemi e prospettive di ricerca', *Quaderni Storici*, 93 (1996), pp. 747-8.

[46] The wife of a stonecutter who lived in a valley near lake Como reported that her husband habitually worked in Turin "from Easter until Christmas" (ASM, *F.C.*, 422/9, 21 July 1676). By contrast, a worker who had migrated to the Kingdom of Naples reported that he was " normally absent from home for two or three years" after which he returned to his village and stayed "for five or six months", while another declared that he had worked in Palermo for twenty-one years and only occasionally had returned and stayed "for a few days" at a time (quotations in Raul Merzario, "Una fabbrica di uomini. L'emigrazione dalla montagna comasca (1600-1750 circa)", *Mélanges de l'Ecole francaise de Rome . Moyen Age-Temps modernes*, vol. 96/1, pp. 164-5).

Regardless of the length of their absence those construction workers exhibited a strong sense of cohesion and solidarity not only with members of their team, but also with other migrants from the same valley (in part, one is inclined to assume, because they all spoke the same dialect). Their solidarity was nurtured not only by their common place of origin (and often by family ties), but also by their need to stick together in a social milieu that looked at them, not always favourably, as 'outsiders' (*forestieri*). Solidarity could mean being able to entrust a letter or even some money intended for the family to a co-worker who happened to be on his way home ahead of the team;[47] it meant as well living in the same tightly-knit neighbourhood or sharing the same cramped living quarters.[48] Cohesion and solidarity could also take the form of a separate confraternity that catered to the spiritual (and, in emergencies, material) needs of its members[49]; or it could lead to the formation of a *de facto* guild as was done in Lucca by the many construction workers from Lombardy who operated there.[50] Of the immigrants from the Lake Como region working in Venice it was said that "they have their own association..., set their own [work] rules almost as if they were a republic".[51]

A similar case was that of the iron workers from the Brescia hinterland. Here, too, was a highly skilled labour force renowned since the early XVI century for its expertise in the 'indirect method' of smelting iron ores in the blast furnace. It operated in highly structured teams: at the top stood the master smith (*maestro ferraio*), an experienced and literate worker responsible for recruiting his own team at home and for supervising the whole smelting process; under him was the *maestro fuciniere* (furnace master) charged with the construction and maintenance of the blast furnace as well as with its operation; further down the pecking order were several charcoal makers who supplied fuel to the furnace;

[47] Merzario, "Una fabbrica di uomini", pp. 159-60.
[48] Simona Cerutti, *La ville et les métiers. Naissance d'un language corporatif (Turin 17e-18e siècles)*, (Paris 1990), pp. 48-50.
[49] Daniele Zardin, 'Le confraternite in Italia settentrionale fra XV e XVII secolo', *Società e Storia*, 35 (1987), pp. 92-3.
[50] Marino Berengo, *Nobili e mercanti nella Lucca del Cinquecento*, (Turin 1965), pp.72-73.
[51] Quotation in Zardin, "Le confraternite in Italia", p. 93n.

lastly came the forge smiths who transformed the pig-iron produced in the furnace into wrought iron.[52] As for the unskilled workers needed for a variety of menial tasks, like hauling the mineral and the charcoal to the furnace, they were recruited in the area where a skilled Brescian team happened to be working.[53]

From mid-XVI century to well into the XVIII century Tuscany was one of the most important destinations of the Brescian iron masters. While Tuscany itself had little to offer in terms of iron mines, yet was rich in timber resources needed to produce charcoal, the island of Elba off the Tuscan shore had an abundance of the former and a near total lack of the latter. Elba ores were thus shipped to the mainland there to be smelted by Brescian iron masters and their teams during annual smelting campaigns of six to eight months, after which many of them went back to their native village until the next campaign. From the start, one might add, the whole enterprise was strongly encouraged by, and turned to be quite profitable for, the rulers of Tuscany and eventually the area became a chief source of iron for the rest of Italy with annual outputs that fluctuated between 1,500 and 2,500 metric tons during the XVII century.[54]

[52] Jean-François Belhoste, "Le migrazioni dei fabbri bergamaschi in Delfinato" in *Mobilità imprenditoriale e del lavoro*, p.49.

[53] Raffaello Vergani, "Mobilità e migrazioni dei minatori a sud delle Alpi" in *Le migrazioni in Europa*, pp. 613-4, stresses the contrast between the mobility of skilled workers and the sedentary character of unskilled labourers whom the former recruited from the local peasantry.

[54] The iron industry in Tuscany and the key role played in it by iron masters from the Brescian and Bergamasque Alps has been thoroughly researched by Roberta Morelli in three definitive essays: 'Sullo stato d'infanzia della siderurgia secentesca: le ferriere di Follonica e Cornia (1640-1680)', *Ricerche storiche*, 10/3 (1980), pp. 479-517; "Dal processo diretto al processo indiretto di fusione del ferro: cambiamenti socio-economici nella Toscana del Cinquecento" in *Dal basso fuoco all'altoforno* ed. Ninina Cuomo di Caprio and Carlo Simoni, (Brescia 1989), pp. 121-6; and "Men of Iron: Masters of the Iron Industry in Sixteenth-Century Tuscany" in *The Workplace before the Factory. Artisans and Proletarians, 1500-1800* (ed.) Thomas Max Shafley and Leonard N. Rosenband, (Ithaca-London 1993), pp. 146-64. See also Manlio Calegari, 'Forni 'alla bresciana' nell'Italia del XVI secolo', *Quaderni Storici*, 70 (1989), pp. 77-99. On the diaspora of metal workers from the valleys north of Bergamo to various European countries see Andrea Colli, "L'attività siderurgica nel territorio bergamasco in età moderna" in *Storia economica e sociale di Bergamo in età moderna*", pp. 199-202.

Before closing it may be well to consider how migration affected the communities from which it originated. For one thing, it produced an imbalance of astonishing proportions between men and women: data on a number of villages at the foot of the Alps show sex ratios ranging from 55 to 78 men per 100 women.[55] Imbalances of this magnitude could not but result in fewer marriages, late age at marriage and ultimately lower than normal fertility which, in conjunction with the fact that some migrants either died away from home or chose never to return, was responsible for the decline or, at best, the demographic stagnation that has been observed in a number of localities.[56]

The shortage of men also had the unintended effect of enhancing the economic and social standing of peasant women. On the one hand it placed in their hands the main responsibility for cultivating what little land the family owned, for raising a few head of cattle, for chopping and hauling wood while their husband was away – in short, it put them in charge of one of the two indispensable legs on which the livelihood of the family rested. The crucial economic role women played in the absence of men gave them an enhanced social role as well. This is obviously hard to document, yet it stands to reason that all kinds of mundane matters, such as quarrels with neighbours, discussions with the tax collector, or marriage arrangements, often enough had to be dealt with by them, thus resulting in "a true reversal of social values and of decision-making power within the family and the community" to the point that at least in one village, when the chief administrator of the community (known as *console*) happened to be absent, "his office was held by a woman."[57]

The crucial role played by women was likely to be taken for granted by the villagers at the time, but it caught the attention of an outsider (a monk) who happened to travel through one of the roughest valleys in

[55] Bruno Caizzi, *Il Comasco sotto il dominio spagnolo. Saggi di storia economica e sociale*, (Como 1955), p. 179; and Raul Merzario, *Il paese stretto. Strategie matrimoniali nella diocesi di Como, secoli XVI-XVIII*, (Turini 1981), p. 96; by the same author, *Il capitalismo nelle montagne*, p. 60 and "Una fabbrica di uomini", pp.166-170.
[56] Caizzi, *Il Comasco*, p. 180.
[57] Merzario, *Il capitalismo nelle montagne*, p. 63.

Lombardy and a breeding ground for male migrants, the Val d'Intelvi, in 1625.[58] He wrote in amazement and admiration:

> "Here we see that women are viragos ... for they perform manly work; they buy and sell, run their households, go to market, plough the fields and sow them, mow the grass, cut wood, thresh grain after harvesting it and haul it home in their wagons. So much so, in fact, that when I first travelled here and saw these women perform manly work I was amazed and pursed my lips and frowned. And when I saw them with cattle prods and hatchets in their hands and a scythe on their shoulder, I felt as if I had arrived among the warlike Amazons. Just as the latter did not want men to surpass them in the use of weapons, neither do these women let their husbands, fathers and brothers, who go out into the world in order to acquire by strenuous work riches [sic] and food, be better than themselves in terms of toil and endurance. Actually they do better than they, for after spending the entire day in manly work like their men, at night instead of resting they attend to woman's work."

The good monk may have exaggerated things a little and his far-fetched reference to the Amazons tells us more about the literary conventions of the Baroque age than about the peasant women of Val d'Intelvi. Yet, his comments are remarkable in that they stand in sharp contrast to the cliché popular at the time that portrayed and ridiculed the peasantry as a mass of ignorant, dirty louts prone to sloth and to cheating the landlords.[59]

His comments are no less remarkable in that they foreshadow the conclusions reached by modern historians about the peasants' adaptability to the harsh conditions of their environment and their ingenuity in devising strategies capable of ensuring their own survival.

[58] R. Rusca, *La descrittione del borgo di Campione et altri luoghi circonvicini, et particolarmente Lugano* (1625) quoted in Merzario, *Il capitalismo nelle montagne*, pp. 61-2.

[59] On the popular (and urban) image of the peasant and the cheap literature it spawned see Emilio Sereni, "Agricoltura e mondo rurale" in *Storia d'Italia Einaudi*, vol. 1, *I caratteri originali*, (Turin 1972), pp.193-4; and for samples of that often scurrilous literature, Gian Paolo Marchi, "La schiuma del mondo. Testimonianze di una letteratura anticontadina tra Medioevo e Rinascimento" in *Uomini e civiltà agraria in territorio veronese*, vol. 2, ed. Giorgio Borelli, (Verona 1982) pp. 663-80.

# *Debates and comments*