Dora M. Dumont

‘Strange and Exorbitant Demands’: Rural Labour in Nineteenth-Century Bologna

They have been dismissed as a ‘sack of potatoes’ by Marx, coupled sneeringly with a ‘whoreson malt-horse drudge’ by Shakespeare, and largely passed over as an historical subject of any great significance by most European historians. But do peasants really deserve such disdain?

Politics provides a frequent basis for asserting that they do. If granted any political role at all, peasants are held to be wholly reactionary, firmly under the thrall of lord and priest.[1] There are, of course, exceptions — French scholars in particular have gone far toward exploring the thinking behind peasant politics during revolutions[2] — but they in turn are frequently relegated to the sidelines rather than placed centrally in the broader European literature.

To do so, however, is to the detriment of urban- as well as rural-focused scholars, for there is much to learn from the peasantry. The province of Bologna in north-central Italy provides an especially interesting case during the first half of the nineteenth century. Peasants there, as in France, had their reasons for comparatively conservative political behaviour, and sometimes there were quite logical reasons too. But the countryside of the Bolognese is striking for another reason as well: the nature and behaviour of the peasantry as a labouring population. A study of rural rather than urban patterns of collective action reveals that there are alternatives to the paths of class development described by historians, which largely pertain to urban populations. Even working within the standard model of working-class formation,[3] rural people can surprise urban-focused historians by acting in a ‘modern’ manner before urban people did. In the Bolognese, far from lagging behind the

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Figure 1
Angelo Morbelli, 'Per ottanta centesimi' (1895). Women workers in the ricefields of the Po. Permission of the Fondazione Museo Francesco Borgogna

urban artisanry or factory proletariat, rural labour *preceded* them in the outlines of a modern labour movement in the nineteenth century.

Several historians have already described the unusual nature of rural labour in the north-central Italian Padana, of which Bologna's plains constitute one part (see Figure 1).[4] The vast and fertile Po Valley was home to the *braccianti* — those with nothing but their arms (*braccia*) to earn their daily bread. Whereas these accounts, however, focus on the 1880s and beyond — as does Italian labour history in general — the argument for the importance of rural labour is strengthened by looking further back, to the decades preceding national unification in 1860. A study of police files and court records from the era between the French Revolution and Unification shows that there was already a substantial amount of rebellious activity on the part of rural labourers.

The following will focus on a particular case of rural labour in the Bolognese, the ricefield workers who burst on the scene with the French Revolution. Through the Restoration and the Risorgimento, and before urban workers began to do so, they made a transition familiar to students of urban working-class activity: their earliest actions were very much a rural equivalent to machine-breaking, while by the 1850s they had moved into the proactive realm of modern strikes.[5]

Bologna from Revolution to Restoration

Nineteenth-century Bologna was, reluctantly, a part of the Papal States. By the time Napoleon's armies marched into the province in 1796, the Pope's territories were notorious for their high rates of mendicancy, illiteracy and governmental inefficiency. Bologna's economic strength of earlier centuries, largely based on silk and hemp production, had given way to a drawn-out process of deindustrialization. This long-term dispersal of urban production dovetailed with more abrupt economic decline after 1796.[6] The radical phase of the Revolution was definitively over back in France; Napoleon had proved his merit to the moderate Directory by shooting down the protesters of Prairial, and the era of the *maximum* had given way to that of the *jeunesse dorée*. The 'reforms' carried by the Revolutionary army would be geared

toward French or local bourgeois interests and as such would be largely detrimental to the labouring population. Silk production, which had employed 12,000 people in the early 1790s, would support only 921 workers (760 of them women and another 83 children) in 1824 — but one example of the collapse of stable employment.[7]

In addition to the hardships accompanying military occupation (exacerbated by Austrian reoccupation in 1799, and the return of the French the following year), the lives of Bolognese workers were fundamentally shaken by the sudden introduction of capitalism. The first test of Bolognese capitalism was not the textile trades, as is usually the case, but agriculture, especially rice. Rice cultivation had been banned in the province as far back as 1595, presumably because the extensive irrigation it requires had drastic consequences for the surrounding countryside.[8] Although a handful of ricefields had already appeared in 1794–5, it was only after 1796 that they spread rapidly across the province.[9] The few new concessions for ricefields then granted between 1804 and 1812 (added to which were others cultivated illegally) were dwarfed by the seventy-five concessions handed out between 1812 and 1816.[10]

Upon Napoleon's defeat, the Italian states once again became a pawn in the power plays of greater European powers. The Congress of Vienna divided the peninsula into eight states, returning Bologna to papal rule and as such essentially to Austrian control. Although the Restoration era maintained many Napoleonic economic policies, one way that Pius VII's officials tried to restore the ancien regime was by resetting limits on agricultural capitalism. Both state and local elites attacked the unrestrained expansion of rice cultivation, largely as a means of checking the bourgeoisie and restoring aristocratic dominance over the countryside.[11]

Ricefields thus became a focal point of rural tensions during the transition back to papal rule. Even local elites objected to their presence, for ricefields affected the entire community, wealthy as well as poor, in a variety of ways. Despite the substantial power supplied by the Po River, for instance, hydraulic energy was periodically too low to maintain both grain and spinning mills in the province even before widespread rice cultivation — a dilemma further exacerbated by political and commercial corruption.[12] By diverting water to ricefields, ricefield proprietors

strained already limited resources. A petition from Budrio illustrates how ricefield owners evaded community regulations regarding water usage. A Signor Bertocchi had rented a mill there, but it quickly became apparent that his real interest lay with the water rights he acquired with the rental. Instead of using water as stipulated by local law, Bertocchi was diverting it to his ricefield, leaving the local population with too little hydraulic power to mill its grain. To forestall action being taken against him, he had put his father on the board of the Consortium of Millers.[13]

Competition over resources was a common basis for complaints against ricefields, but community opposition to ricefields in the Restoration was framed almost entirely as a public health issue.[14] Because of their extensive irrigation, ricefields created 'miasmic fogs' that formed above and around parts of the province. The sudden introduction of wetlands led to dramatic increases in sickness and mortality, marked especially by the 'so-obstinate periodic fevers' of malaria (*mal aria*, or bad air), a situation that contrasted with the memory of a previous golden age of 'great purity of air' and rare illness. Other crops nearby also suffered, as did livestock. One petition summarized rice's effects on crops, livestock and human health when it declaimed a 'universal cry of execration leav[ing] everyone's mouth against the fatal cause that poisons the miserable human constitution of our unhappy countryside'.[15]

Equally dramatic were the social effects. Unlike the hills of the province, where the independent peasant family continued to be the rule, that family model was becoming an anomaly on the plains. Until capitalism transformed the plains into large consolidated estates, most plains families operated under the *mezzadria*, or sharecropping, system. The landowner provided capital, supplies and land; the tenant, tools and labour. Theoretically, the two parties split the proceeds, but in reality the landlord invariably came out ahead. *Mezzadri* sank deeper and deeper into debt, but they at least had access to land. With the growing popularity of rice, which ensured rapid and sure profits, more and more landlords ejected sharecroppers from their land in order to turn it into consolidated holdings for rice cultivation. The result, very quickly, was the displacement of rural families, widespread landlessness and the creation of a new class of agricultural wage-earners: the *braccianti*, who then conveniently

supplied ricefield owners with a vast pool of cheap and fairly desperate labour. *Braccianti* already had a long tradition in the province, as in much of northern Italy, but they now became a defining feature of the Bolognese countryside for the first time. Because rice has a brief but labour-intensive season, large numbers of ricefield workers travelled periodically through the province. Elites were alarmed by the presence of these travelling gangs, and lower-status residents also expressed hostility towards 'foreigners' from other parts of the province; groups of men and women headed for the local ricefields sometimes clashed violently with locals.[16]

If some objections to ricefields crossed class lines, the rural labouring population had particular reasons for resenting the new face of the countryside. Some of them had become landless as a result, and others faced that very real possibility. To a certain extent, this created a common ground between peasants and day labourers.[17] Ricefield proprietors might protest that they provided work for labourers who would otherwise be unemployed altogether — one, Filippo Roversi, even declared that he had expanded production upon the 'fervent requests of his peasants and braccianti'[18] — but popular perception was just the opposite. The first popular actions regarding ricefields at the beginning of the Restoration demanded not their expansion but their elimination.

In both 1816 and 1817, several rural communities banded together to destroy ricefields in what looked very much like a rural equivalent to machine-breaking. In 1816, a crowd from Anzola and seven other communities first gathered on the morning of 8 May, but the Prior managed to dissuade them from taking action for the moment by promising to speak to the papal Legate in Bologna on their behalf. By 'assuring them that they would be consoled within three days', he convinced them to return home. At the end of the allotted time, however, it was clear that no action was forthcoming from Bologna, and on the morning of 11 May the *campana a martello*, the tocsin or call to action, rang again in the eight communities. Peasants, *braccianti*, and some artisans gathered once again; this time, they marched out to several nearby ricefields and destroyed them by breaking the waterlocks controlling water levels in the fields.[19]

The action was as symbolic as it was pragmatic; it also revealed more planning than spontaneity. The decision to act was based

Figure 2
A public call to destroy the ricefields. Permission Archivio di Stato di Bologna

on several means of coordination among the people involved. Although all the actual participants were labourers, peasants or artisans, several local elites were accused of having instigated the affair. One, Emanuele Piccioli, was accused of gathering a crowd around him by holding out the promise of alms:

> In the meantime other beggars [*questuanti*] gathered around him, mostly little boys and women, but upon some peasants drawing near and joining them, I heard that he began talking with the crowd.[20]

Presumably, Piccioli was instigating the *popolo* to destroy the ricefields by bribing them with a handout: as we have seen, elites objected to rice cultivation as well. But while this may have been one means by which action was incited, it was not the only one, nor even the most important. There had to be further communication between Piccioli's 'beggars', women and children and the primarily adult male peasants and day labourers who were actually arrested.[21] And indeed, between Piccioli's gathering and the destruction of the ricefields, there had been substantial popular discussion on what to do. Witnesses reported numbers of '*crocchi di Paesani*' discussing the matter heatedly, and 'various groups of peasants, women, and boys' denouncing the ricefields. At least one notice was anonymously posted calling on people to join in (see Figure 2). And finally, the night before the ricefields

were destroyed a shoemaker named Vincenzo Malferrari had gone around to all the houses in Panzaro and Recovato, telling inhabitants to gather when they heard the bells rung in Castel S. Franco the next morning.

Malferrari's visit adds weight to the argument that initiative was far more popular than elite, but it was significant for another reason as well: he told the people he visited that he was acting on the orders of the municipal authorities. This might have been a deliberate lie in order to lure more apprehensive residents into participating, but it also quite possibly reflected a genuine belief that the government would sanction the destruction of the ricefields. The Restoration state had divided existing ricefields into three categories: those permitted to continue under cultivation, those to be phased out after the 1816 crop, and those in which cultivation was to be immediately terminated. Only the latter were attacked in 1816. By destroying only those ricefields that the government had already condemned, peasants and day labourers perceived themselves as enacting the intentions of the state rather than rebelling against it; they were merely rectifying the laxity of local officials in enforcing the law on recalcitrant landowners.

The papal authorities did not see things in the same light, and viewed 'with a profound bitterness and grave indignation the excesses to which a mob of ill-advised men gave way'.[22] Rather surprisingly, however, some local elites appeared rather sympathetic: one chronicler pointed out that the event was 'executed with the utmost order, without damage or offence to anyone . . . their operation completed, everyone returned to their homes'.[23] Don Piccioli's activity, ambiguous a role though it played, also indicated elite support. The following year, however, both elite initiative and elite approval were less in evidence.

Attacks on ricefields occurred again in 1817, this time centered in Zola Predosa and Borgo Panigale, but participation dropped slightly to roughly eighty to one hundred. One report implied that it was more difficult to raise public support this second year; in Borgo Panigale, 'a mob of peasants' (*una masnada di Villici*) from several communes rang the *campana a martello* for an hour without a single person responding to that traditional call to action. Despite the lower turnout, though, there was an even more direct claim made to political legitimization than in 1816. Whereas the previous year's actors may have believed they were fulfilling

the government's desires, those of 1817 went directly to the *gonfaloniere*, or chief magistrate, to demand that he be their *capo* (leader). Well before dawn on 19 May, he awoke to find about seventy armed people surrounding his house. At first he thought they were unemployed labourers who had come to ask for work, but they instead demanded that he accompany them to the ricefields. When he refused, they seized his brother, saying, 'your brother the *gonfaloniere* doesn't want to come with us to give the order to destroy the ricefield, you'll come instead'.[24] By demanding that a local authority figure give the order for their actions, the crowd tried to ensure that their activity would be considered legitimate; settling on the *gonfaloniere*'s brother was an acceptable alternative insofar as he was related to that authority. Hence the events of 1817 seemed more distinctly popular in origin than those of the preceding year, and more insistent on demanding that local authority bend to popular will. In this respect, ricefield attacks were grounded firmly in rural collective action more generally during the Revolutionary and Restoration eras.

From 'Rural Luddism' to Strikes

The popular response to ricefields during the Restoration turned out to be but a prelude to more sustained action on the part of rural labour. Popular destruction of ricefields recurred rarely after 1817; one episode is recorded in 1835, and another in 1841.[25] (Indeed, most forms of collective action dwindled in the province from about 1819 until a burst of food riots in 1829, and then again for much of the 1830s.) The collapse of collective resistance to ricefields reflected a growing ambivalence in popular opinion. Peasants and even *braccianti*, who relied on ricefields for work, still petitioned against new ricefields, although they sometimes 'did not dare show such a desire openly'.[26] At the same time, however, ricefields now constituted such a critical source of employment that workers sometimes protested against *opposition* to the cultivation of new fields. When a health delegation met in Molinella in 1854 to discuss whether to grant a new licence, for instance, they were startled to see

> the unusual sight of more than a hundred workers gathered in the piazza . . . stopping in various little clusters they talked amongst themselves on the said

> question, declaring that said cultivation was innocuous, and that the opposition of the Commune was unjust, since it took a means of earning away from the workers.[27]

By the 1850s, this episode suggests, ricefields had become part of the spectrum of workers' resources to be protected from an encroaching state.

Underlying the apparent acceptance of rice cultivation in the province, however, were new forms of struggle regarding rice. Workers continued to resist the changing structures of rural relations, but by the 1840s and 1850s their collective action began to reflect a more complex blend of traditional and emerging forms of collective action. The emergence of new types of collective action was prompted in part by a second burst of rapid expansion of rice cultivation during the 1830s. Still under 4000 hectares in 1831, ricefields covered over 5000 in 1841, an increase of over 25% in ten years. By now the transition of the fertile plains from family farms to large agricultural estates was nearly complete.[28]

Proprietors did not regard the rural world they had created without ambivalence. Many of them had joined together in the *Società Agraria*, an Agrarian Society given to intellectual encounters and wholly devoted to capitalism — its interests lay primarily with the rationalization of agriculture — but they regarded the new rural world with dismay as well as enthusiasm. On the one hand, Agrarian Society members continued to insist that they were providing honest employment to workers who would otherwise be idle and, as a necessary corollary to idleness, immoral.[29] In this respect ricefield work was doubly advantageous, comparable to the new textile industries lauded as 'that blessed manufacture. Oh! How many crimes that would otherwise be committed . . . how many popular tumults . . . oh how many pure maidens owe to that inestimable benefice their intact and immaculate honour' (this last apparently straightfaced, despite the fact that pay for textile work was notoriously so low that it regularly drove women into prostitution).[30] At the same time, however, proprietors blamed ricefields for creating a true rural proletariat no longer bound to their betters by agricultural pacts, a 'great and dangerous leprosy' on the face of rural society.[31]

And increasingly in the mid-1840s, rural labourers gave proprietors cause for concern. The deference that presumably

marked traditional rural relations[32] was now replaced by demands for bread, more work and higher wages, a general rural development in which ricefield workers were central. Like much of Europe, Bologna was in a serious economic condition in 1846, a combination of agricultural and industrial crises. Conditions continued to deteriorate as the 1847 hemp harvest was two-thirds less than its normal level, thereby guaranteeing high unemployment in hempwork as well.[33] The city's hempworkers and ropemakers customarily relied on public assistance during the summer months, but from 1846 to 1848 the public workhouse (the *casa di pubblica beneficienza*, more popularly known as the *casa di maleficienza* for its miserable conditions) was completely swamped by workers from all crafts. By June of 1848, an additional 1500 people had been admitted, and the funds allocated for the entire year were almost used up. Even the professional classes, wrote the cardinal legate, were largely unemployed.[34] Within this desperate scenario, the rural unemployed were at the greater disadvantage of being generally refused employment at the public workhouse; authorities preferred to reserve that resource for preventing unrest among urban workers.

The election of Pope Pius IX in 1846 seemed to offer momentary hope to the Bolognese. Pius received a warm welcome from all levels of society, even in the notoriously anticlerical Bologna. The working poor had suffered under the popes preceding him: Gregory XIV's implementation of a series of laws designed to crack down on petty criminals, for instance, had the effect of increasing harassment of the labouring poor (one such measure stipulated that those merely *suspected* of theft be imprisoned until they could provide evidence of employment).[35] Pius, by contrast, seemed to promise a new era, and his extension of a general amnesty to political prisoners soon after his ascension to the Holy See merely confirmed public opinion to that effect. Pius would turn reactionary with a vengeance after the revolution of 1848; in his first years, though, enthusiastic crowds of all classes acclaimed him as 'our adored sovereign'.[36]

Yet popular affection for the new pope–ruler did not prevent collective action during his reign; rather, such actions could even be carried out in the Pope's own name. In December 1846, for instance, one hundred people went to the deputy of a public works project in search of employment. They carried two banners, one with the Pope's coat of arms and the other reading

'Long live Pius IX'; once set to work, the labourers continued to display the banners near them.[37] Although their actions were objectionable in the eyes of the papal government, these workers did not see themselves as acting against that government. The spurt of collective action in 1846 suggests that like liberals, workers viewed Pius' election as an opportunity: surely the new political atmosphere pertained to them as well. In this respect, Pius' election was apparently more significant to rural labourers than was the revolution of 1848. The latter, as essentially an urban phenomenon, raised little participation in Bologna's hinterlands — less because of the latter's inherent conservatism than because this revolution, as the preceding ones, offered little by way of improvement for a rural population.

Authorities were right to be alarmed at such activity, accompanied though it was by proclaimed loyalty to the Pope. Although protesting labourers were clearly more interested in demanding that the state take action than in overthrowing the state in any way, the rising wave of rural collective action in the mid-1840s was increasingly insistent and difficult to control. A resurgence of grain riots was one indication that something had changed, for the grain riots after 1846 were more violent than usual. Rather than limiting themselves to evoking moral economy in the bakery or in front of municipal offices, labourers forced open stores and private stocks on several occasions. An 1846 report could still be reassuring that 'the government was at all times respected', but a year later it was more typical to read of multitudes 'shouting Death to the Prior, death to the Secretary, let's go, they shouted, let's go up to kill them'.[38] The heightened atmosphere of bread riots did not necessarily indicate a definitive shift from peaceful to violent action: they did, however, reflect a general development of collective action in which ricefield workers overlapped with the unemployed in a less traditional manner. Both of those groups now began using the new weapon of the strike on a vast scale, several years before the province's urban workers employed the tactic.

As early as 1837, unemployed labourers were establishing a pattern of action that would become typical in the following decade. In early May, labourers in Budrio, Molinella and Baricella demanded work from communal authorities, protesting at the same time that proprietors had been paying them in kind rather than cash. They dispersed, however, with 'the simple

promise of providing them with employment'.[39] The workers returned during the following week, this time reiterating their demand with greater insistence — still, albeit, with 'all due submission'. For the rest of the month, authorities reported sporadic complaints and eventually responded by establishing public works projects to mitigate the pressing unemployment.[40]

Such demands, however, soon took the form of a proto-strike as the unemployed coupled demands for work with demands for more compensation. As early as 1845 (before the economic crisis had even fully set in), 350 out-of-work people descended upon a public works project in Persiceto demanding work for themselves at, moreover, 'an exorbitant sum'.[41] Such episodes became increasingly common over the next several years, in a basic pattern that nonetheless shifted flexibly to accommodate varying circumstances. The attitudes of those seeking work could vary considerably. A group might go to the magistrature 'begging, in the most submissive way, to be provided with work'. Told to do their best until the public works project was ready, they 'turned, but sighing and unwilling, because the misery was visible on their faces'.[42] On a similar occasion, a group returned quietly to their homes when told to dissemble.[43]

Local authorities tended to be sympathetic and even distressed about the fate of such workers, an attitude easier to maintain when petitioners were so meek. But the size alone of such gatherings could make them daunting, even when workers were moderately acquiescent; one might assume that the sight of hundreds of workers gathered in a tiny town square 'shouting "work!"' could make explicit threats superfluous.[44] And labourers were not always acquiescent when making demands or receiving rejections. They could move from courteous requests to the threat of violence within a few days, as in Castenaso in 1849. On April 13, about 15 *braccianti* asked for work, without at first exceeding 'the limits of a placid demonstration'. Two days later, however, they returned in greater numbers. This time, they demanded work immediately, or else money. If neither was provided by the 17th, they threatened, they were ready to use violence against 'the most comfortable inhabitants of the commune'.[45]

Across the range of tones from humble plea to outright (though controlled) threat, those demanding work almost unanimously insisted on one thing: it was work they wanted, and not charity,

though they might accept a handout if nothing else was forthcoming. Local officials often hastened to create public works projects out of a spirit of combined charity and social control. When they refused, workers might go ahead with their plans anyway. One group of thirty, told there was no work available, replied 'we'll find something to do ourselves' and set to work clearing mud from the streets.[46] As long as some sort of work had been performed, it would have to be paid, and the action also transformed the payment from charity into earned wages. There were exceptions to this rule; in Bagnocavallo, workers both demanded a full day's pay for a half day's work and seized bread from the communal bakery, and on another occasion 600 *proletari* demanded to be paid without having worked at all that day.[47] In general, though, workers insisted on not only the performance of work but the formalities as well. If they showed up at the site and found no overseer (when, for instance, work was cancelled during poor weather) they might go to his home and insist both that the work be carried out and that he be present in order to bestow legitimacy.[48]

In addition to the provision of work, labourers demanded what they considered a reasonable amount of money for their labour. On one project a rumour went out among the workers that a supervisor had asserted that their pay was higher than they merited, prompting them to turn on him in a fury.[49] Public work paid absurdly little. The dayworkers who were offered 22 or 23 *bajocchi* when flour cost 62 *bajocchi* concluded that it was not even worth working for those wages.[50] In a similar case, 200–300 workers in Budrio started to work, but after a time collective frustration reached a critical point and some of them began shouting

> 'to hell with this work, you don't earn anything, it's better to stay at home than wear yourself out for 10 or 12 *bajocchi*.' These voices and shouts were an electric shock that ran through the entire crowd

though in this case the protest was not enough to sustain any sort of action; the next morning almost everyone returned to work for the same wages as before.[51] Even if workers were unable to sustain a protest's momentum, they reflected the expectation that wages be somewhat in line with current bread prices.

Sometimes workers merely abandoned the project when wages

fell to an unacceptable level: on the rumour that the full pay would not be delivered one day, workers in S. Pietro simply 'without chaos, without insolence, or *altro di cattivo* left work'.[52] But public works labourers also began to demand higher wages in a way that looked like the early stages of strikes, employing 'the new method of chasing the toilers and *Braccianti* of good will from work' in an obvious effort to remove what they would several decades later call scabs.[53] Such efforts to enforce strike participation allowed authorities to reconcile their sympathy with suffering workers with a condemnation of the action itself: they could excuse the bulk of participants by concentrating blame on a handful of troublemakers. Authorities insisted that most workers were docile and law-abiding, but had been misled by instigators. The instigators themselves, authorities tried to show, were often not even in real need. A typical example was an 1854 protest by women 'under pretext of hunger'. Officials decided they merited no real sympathy because their circumstances were deemed not dire; inspections of the homes of some of the women involved had found them 'discreetly provided with not only goods of basic necessity' but other products like pork. Similarly, the magistrature of Baricella was assured that sixty *braccianti* who had sought work from him

> for now couldn't find themselves in the urgent extreme of needing help from the Commune, because in the past year, which was consistently fruitful, they had had every means of providing themselves with necessities.

Such accusations coupled the morality of those willing to work with the purportedly faked poverty and unwillingness to work of the instigators ('the majority are dragged along by a few shameless people [*disgraziati*] who would never want to work').[54] Attempting to show that ringleaders did not represent the circumstances of most workers, authorities used that argument as the basis for declaring that ringleaders furthermore did not represent the state of mind of most workers when it came to work stoppages. But while there certainly were some participants who were more committed than others, and a fair amount of coercive force employed in some cases against more reluctant participants, officials exaggerated the degree to which ringleaders differed from other workers. The view of a small handful of instigators manipulating large numbers of reluctant followers is

difficult to reconcile with the large numbers of people — up to several hundred — involved in these actions. It is likely that officials and proprietors were responding to the novelty of the terms of confrontation. Although the word *proletari*, proletarians, was already being applied to rural labourers, the word *sciopero*, strike, did not yet appear — 'strange and exorbitant demands' was the only way irritated employers could conceptualize their workers' actions.[55] It appeared that unemployed workers were entering a new realm of labour practices that elites and officials did not yet comprehend, further suggesting that urban labourers had not yet provided examples of such practices.

All of these dynamics at public works projects formed the context for similar developments at ricefields around the province. Public works strikes were an indication of desperation, not strength, and it was thus all the more unusual that ricefield workers should strike for more wages against this backdrop of dire unemployment. But in fact, unemployed workers and ricefield workers overlapped in several ways. When workers descended upon ricefields to demand they be allowed to work there, for instance, they blurred the lines between ricefield workers and the general pool of the rural unemployed. Twenty workers who 'wanted by force to work or rather to ruin a piece of land by cultivating it as a ricefield though it wasn't destined for that cultivation' were essentially creating a public works project out of rice cultivation. At the same time, they demanded to speak with the Prior: they evidently intended to demand work at existing ricefields, for they hoped he would order the owners of other ricefields to pay them a certain level.[56]

Public works and ricefield strikes overlapped in form and intent as well, especially in the combined demands for work and higher wages. A typical example of a ricefield strike can be drawn from Castel Maggiore, where a group from Minerbio came to a worksite and demanded they too be provided with work at, moreover, double the current rate, a raise 'which they then wanted the other workers to have as well'.[57] It was not uncommon for ricefield strikers to demand their wage-rates be doubled. The sums involved were so minimal that even doubling them would have provided families with scant resources. It was, however, an immensely bold demand in light of current high unemployment, as evidenced by the concurrent public works demands.

As was often the case for public works, too, this combination

in ricefield strikes rested on the organization of work into gangs. For ricefield work, which required many hands for the short season, a proprietor would pay a *caporale* to bring workers in for a particular job and oversee them until it was completed. The *caporale* would often go to the same part of the province year after year to collect workers.[58] Women constituted a sizable proportion of these gangs, often but not always travelling with male relatives. In the Agro Romano, the territory around Rome, agricultural workgangs were classified as 'bastard', in which women and children were a substantial majority, or 'choice', in which males over twenty still constituted only one-third to one-half of the gang; we can assume the situation in Bologna was similar.[59] Certainly women and children exclusively filled certain functions, most notably the weeding of the early summer months.[60] In keeping with the traditional assumption that women would work, there were no apparent objections to the presence of women in the harsh conditions of ricefields; there were, rather, numerous complaints about the *mix* of men and women at work and, even worse, in the (abominable we might point out) night barracks. 'They begin with the most obscene and licentious discourses,' complained one priest, and thus, he presumed, could only 'finish with actions' which he could only imagine occurring in the dark.[61] The reduction of the inadequacy of night lodging to a question of promiscuity was typical of elites' approach to the question of labour; the observation that people worked up to their shins in stagnant water was likewise translated into a threat to morality since wet clothes were considered too revealing of the position of women bent double over their work, and thus a serious threat to men's presumed virtue.[62] The rhetoric of public health was here reversed: what should have been presented as a public-health issue for workers was instead framed as a matter of morality, reflecting no longer elites' protests against ricefields per se but their objections to ricefield workgangs more specifically.

Both Elda Gentili Zappi and Franco Cazzola suggest that the collective work structure of these gangs provided the basis for rural workers' solidarity during the 1880s. Already during the 1840s, however, gangs were one of the crucial means by which workers engaged in widespread ricefield strikes. Although they could sometimes undermine worker solidarity by heightening a sense of intensely local identity,[63] gangs more often aided in collective action: they meant that small groups of workers

worked and lived together, serving as building blocks into more generalized solidarity. Partly by this means, ricefield workers were able to overcome the local tensions that periods of high unemployment tended to exacerbate. In Medicina, the *Mercato delle Opere* (where workers gathered to be hired) was theatre to a fight in which several workers from Budrio were beaten and chased out of town; when two Medicinese were arrested for the attack, their wives appealed for clemency on the grounds that their men 'didn't want the foreign workers in town for the sole motive of the desire that if only local people remained there would be more work for them'.[64] It is all the more notable, then, that strikes were able to overcome local identities so strong that people from other parts of the same province were 'foreigners', and strikers further crossed communal lines as they travelled to neighbouring ricefields to broaden the work stoppage.

One means by which strikes succeeded over the divide of localism was coercion. In April (the seeding season), workers in a Medicina ricefield began to work until four of them demanded a pay increase 'in such a manner that they not only tried to get the other workers to back them up in their demand but, seeing they didn't consent, threatened to beat them up if they persisted in working'.[65] This ambivalence on the part of potential strikers continued to undermine strikes — but not very much. Strikers might occasionally be 'rejected by the tranquil workers with severe firmness',[66] but these accounts were generally more than balanced by evidence of broad-based participation. Estimates ran from 200 to 2000 at different strikes, no mean feat considering that gangs came together from various parts of the province for short periods of time.

If ricefield strikes broke expectations of optimum strike conditions in this respect, they did so equally in terms of gender composition. Italian historiography has been regrettably silent on the matter of rural women; if anything, they tend to emerge as downtrodden and powerless. But the incipient proletarian woman of the ricefield, on the rare occasions that she emerges in official documents, was no pushover — try though she might to depict herself otherwise. A twenty-three-year-old widow, questioned regarding an 1853 strike, complained that several workers unknown to her had ordered her to stop working, threatening to pull her by the hair if she didn't obey. 'I replied that that was impossible,' Carolina Cantelli told the police, and — one can

imagine her whining a bit, really trying to play up the role of the helpless female — 'I told them I was content with my wages, since I'm just a poor woman.'[67] Violence against women was commonplace, so Cantelli's scenario was quite possible, but it loses credibility when compared to the testimony of an older man who complained in turn that three women 'told me to lay off working. I didn't want to obey, but they started in on me again that I'd do it for my own good. And I [said], Maybe you'd like to beat me. And they [said], Do you think we couldn't do a good job of it?' Cantelli's plaintive reference to her own weakness as a 'poor woman' also fits a little too neatly into a peasant tradition of diverting punishment by playing into the official, urban opinion of rural folk: we acted such because 'we are idiot people [*gente idiota*]'; or, 'Signore, what do you expect from us poor rough and worthless [*dappoco*] folk?'[68]

Ricefield strikes appeared to be a blend of both gender-specific and gender-blind patterns, and the scarcity of references to women may indicate the extent to which their presence was taken for granted, rather than their absence. True, there is no indication of strikes in early summer, when the fields were weeded almost exclusively by women; but the composition of work-gangs meant that women also predominated during the months when strikes did occur (especially late-summer harvesting). According to one priest, for instance, his striking parishioners had been offered the pay of

> just ten miserable *bajocchi*, for which only the women began to work at a price even more vile, but the men remained there thinking that by their example the women too would stop, which in fact happened with everybody hoping that they would improve the conditions of their contract.[69]

If men took the initiative here, they apparently didn't need to apply much coercion to convince the women to join them. And a young man gave a different view of another strike: 'everyone complained, and especially the women, who said they earned only four or five *bajocchi* a day,' emphasizing, that is, the dissatisfaction of women with the status quo.[70] Overall, then, ricefield strikes give the impression of widespread dissatisfaction and willingness to engage in action among even traditionally non-cooperating groups.

Conclusion

Just as ricefield workers blended back into rural society more generally — once the brief rice season was over, they re-assumed other rural identities — so too their protests and demands must be viewed within the broader context of rural collective action. What allowed the modern tool of the strike to emerge first among rural rather than urban workers was not only the 'proletarianization' of their lives by rice cultivation, but their ability to remake traditional forms of collective action precisely during this period. Both phases of ricefield-centred activity took place within the context of other forms of rural collective action,[71] and it is thus all the more striking that the 1840s and 1850s strikes consolidated around the workplace and work persona.

Although the Bolognese *braccianti* may be unusual in the European labour scene, they nevertheless constitute a case of rural labour taking on the appearance of a modern working class sooner than their urban counterparts. Rural *bolognesi* were not, as so often assumed, inevitably mired in the past. They took matters into their own hands and demonstrated a determination and ability to coordinate mass action that urban workers did not yet possess. Indeed, the Bolognese *braccianti* suggest that the urban path to working-class formation must be viewed within the context of rural labour as well. As such, urban-focused historians have much to learn from them about the urban as well as rural world of the nineteenth century. They, if not Marx and Shakespeare, just might end up rethinking their assessment of the peasant.

Notes

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1. This is certainly the case for many studies of Italian peasant behaviour during the French Revolution: Angelo Varni asserts that since peasant religion had 'degenerated into a fanaticism tied to the superstitious traditions of the peasant world', it prevented them from understanding the benefits of the new regime. Carlo Zaghi views Revolution-era peasants similarly: 'with the passing of the centuries they had finished by losing the sense of the universal and the general. Attached to the present, they were incapable of thinking of long-term advantages that would surely derive from political revolution.' Varni, *Bologna napoleonica: Potere e*

società dalla Repubblica cisalpina al Regno d'Italia (1800–06) (Bologna 1973), 42; Zaghi, *L'Italia giacobina* (Turin 1989), 76.

2. See, among others, Maurice Agulhon, *The Republic in the Village: The People of the Var from the French Revolution to the Second Republic*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York 1982); Peter McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life: Political Mobilization in the French Countryside, 1845–1852* (New York 1992); Laura L. Frader, *Peasants and Protest: Agricultural Workers, Politics, and Unions in the Aude, 1850–1914* (Berkeley 1991). Other particularly important studies 'rescuing' the peasantry include Eugen Weber's controversial *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford 1976); Marine Segalen, *Love and Power in the Peasant Family: Rural France in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago 1983); and K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660–1900* (Cambridge 1985).

3. See especially Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, eds, *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton 1986).

4. Franco Cazzola, *Storia delle campagne padane dall'Ottocento a oggi* (Milan 1996); Guido Crainz, *Padania: Il mondo dei braccianti dall'Ottocento alla fuga dalle campagne* (Rome 1994); Elda Gentili Zappi, *If Eight Hours Seem too Few: Women Workers in the Italian Rice Fields* (Albany 1991); see also Stefano Cammelli, 'Prima del macinato: Proteste contadine nel bolognese nel primo decennio unitario', *Società e Storia* 11 (1981): 67–93.

5. The terminology of reactive to proactive action, of course, is from Charles Tilly; see for example *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge 1986) and with Edward Shorter, *Strikes in France, 1830–1968* (London 1974). Questioning a rigid reactive-to-proactive schema began with Tilly himself; see Mark Traugott, ed., *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action* (Durham, NC 1995); also Adriana Lay, 'Scioperi per, scioperi contro: Rivendicazioni e cultura operaia, 1894–1913', *Quaderni Storici* (1981): 487–516, and Craig Calhoun, 'The Radicalism of Tradition: Community Strength or Venerable Disguise and Borrowed Language?' *American Journal of Sociology* 88 (1983): 886–914.

6. On the general effects of the French Revolution in northern Italy, see for instance Michael Broers, 'Italy and the Modern State: The Experience of Napoleonic Rule', in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, vol. 3, *The Transformation of Political Culture, 1789–1848* (Oxford 1987): 489–503; *idem*, *Napoleonic Imperialism and the Savoyard Monarchy, 1773–1821: State Building in Piedmont* (Lewiston, NY 1997). For Bologna, recent studies include Alexander Grab, 'State Power, Brigandage, and Rural Resistance in Napoleonic Italy', *European History Quarterly* 25 (1995): 40; Clarke Garrett, 'Bologna and the French Revolution', *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1850* (1982): 109–20; Livio Antonielli, *I prefetti dell'Italia napoleonica: Repubblica e Regno d'Italia* (Bologna 1983).

7. Luigi Dal Pane, *Economia e società a Bologna nell'età del Risorgimento* (Bologna 1969), 231.

8. In the Lombard part of the Po Valley, on the other hand, ricefields were already well established: hence workers there did not experience the same abruptness with which rice cultivation spread in the Bolognese. Luigi Faccini, *L'economia risicola lombarda dagli inizi del XVIII secolo all'Unità* (Milan 1986).

9. 'Rapporto sopra le Risaje della Provincia di Bologna' (10 August 1816), in *Atti della Commissione Speciale destinata dalla Santità di Nostro Signore Papa Pio IX per le Risaie della Provincia bolognese ed altre l'anno 1816* (Rome 1818); 'Notificazione sulle Risaie, e Valli Artificali della Provincia Bolognese' (16 August 1816), in *Raccolta delle più interessanti disposizioni governative in materia delle Risaie, Valli Artificali, Valli in Colmata, e Deviazioni d'Acque* (Bologna 1841); Paolo Predieri, *Esame storico e statistico alle risaie del bolognese ed agli effetti che ne derivano* (Bologna 1859).

10. Archivio di Stato di Bologna (hereafter ASB), Commissione Apostolica sulle Risaie, Posizioni Antiche, B.4.

11. Alberto de Bernardi, 'Risicoltura e capitalismo', *Studi Storici* 17 (1976): 180–90; Faccini, *Uomini e lavoro in risaia: Il dibattito sulla risicoltura nel '700 e nell'800* (Milan 1976), 44.

12. Alberto Guenzi, *Acqua e industria a Bologna in antico regime* (Turin 1993), ch. 3.

13. ASB, Commissione Apposita sulle Risaie (hereafter CAR), Posizioni Antiche, B.6 (15 July 1816, 18 August 1816).

14. De Bernardi, 'Risicoltura e capitalismo'; Renato Zangheri, 'Un dibattito sulle risaie bolognesi agli inizi della Restaurazione', *Bollettino del Museo del Risorgimento* (1960): 1–30.

15. 'Rapporto ad evasione de' 2 Ricorsi delle Popolazioni di Castel S. Franco, Manzolino, Riolo, Ratellino, ed altre contro le Valli e Risare in dette Comuni Segnati in data 27.28 Gennaro 1816', ASB, CAR, Posizioni Antiche, B.5; see also the medical reports in Faccini, *Uomini e lavoro, passim*.

16. ASB, Tribunale Civile e Criminale, Processi ricevuti 15 March 1817, No. 6042. As Broers points out, there could be as many social and political differences between mountain and plains peoples as between urban and rural populations, exacerbating tensions when workers descended from the mountains. Michael Broers, '"Marx and the Four-Hundred Meters" Contour Line: Regional Responses to the French Revolution in Rural Piedmont', *Journal of Historical Geography* 16:1 (1990): 76–89.

17. It is a mistake to wholly separate the two in any case; on the mixed nature of the rural family economy, see Paul Corner, *Contadini e industrializzazione: Società rurale e impresa in Italia dal 1840 al 1940* (Rome 1993); on the 'worker peasantry', see Douglas R. Holmes and Jean Quataert, 'An Approach to Modern Labor: Worker Peasantries in Historic Saxony and the Friuli Region over Three Centuries', *Comparative Study of Society and History* (1986): 191–216.

18. 'Seconda Convocazione della Comm. Apposita', ASB, CAR, Posizioni Antiche, B.5 (6 April 1816); 'Relazione' (12 July 1816), in *Atti della Commissione Speciale*.

19. ASB, CAR, Posizioni Antiche, B.6 (16 August 1816); 'Memorie storiche bolognesi dall'anno 1800 al 1822', Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archigennasio Series B, MS.3212; ASB, Tribunale Civile e Criminale, Processi ricevuti 9 January 1819, no. 7175; Giuseppe Guidicini, *Diario bolognese dall'anno 1796 al 1818* (Bologna 1886–7), vol. 4, 30.

20. ASB, Tribunale Civile e Criminale, Processi ricevuti 9 January 1819, no. 7175.

21. One exception was Teresa Palolta, the servant of one of the accused elites, who appeared at the head of the crowd armed with a shovel. Still, thought the

reporting official, 'rather than numbering among the instigators she was among the mutineers'. Ibid.

22. 'Notificazione', in *Raccolta delle più interessanti disposizioni* (24 May 1816).

23. 'Diario di Bologna dal 1802 al 1832', Biblioteca Comunale dell' Archigennasio Series B, MS.1127 (May 1816).

24. ASB, Direzione Provinciale, Atti Riservati, B.14, f. 531 (19 May 1817); f. 533 (19 May 1817); f. 539 (19 May 1817); f. 545 (20 May 1817); 'Memorie storiche bolognesi' (May 1817).

25. ASB, Prefettura, Atti Riservati, B.157, f. 124 (15 April 1846).

26. ASB, CAR, 'Oggetti riguardanti la Commissione Straordinaria idraulico sanitaria' (22 April 1846 and 1 October 1847). In defending rice cultivation, Luigi Farini claimed that rural residents held ricefields 'more in love than in hate', but a few pages later had to admit that rice cultivation's general reputation was 'odious'. Farini, *Sulle quistioni sanitarie ed economiche agitate in Italia intorno alle risaie* (Florence 1845), 27, 81.

27. ASB, Direzione Provinciale, Titolo X, R.2, f. 7894 (20 April 1854).

28. Cazzola, *Storia delle campagne padane*, 259–62; ASB, CAR, 'Oggetti riguardanti la Commissione Straordinaria idraulico sanitaria' (24 December 1855).

29. G. Massei, 'I proletarii dell'agricoltura', *Il Felsineo*, N.27, p. 130 (8 July 1847). The sentiment was echoed elsewhere: in a letter to Massei, his brother in Lucca wrote approvingly of the potential for ricefields to employ the young children who 'now wander the streets in slothful flocks'. Carlo Massei, *Delle risaje nel ducato di Lucca e dell'industria lucchese* (Lucca 1841), 9.

30. Ibid., 27.

31. *Della proprietà rurale e dei patti fra il padrone ed il lavoratore: Discorso letto alla Società Agraria di Bologna* (Bologna 1841).

32. James C. Scott, however, has described how adept were peasants elsewhere at hiding their true feelings beneath a façade of deference. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven 1985).

33. ASB, Direzione Provinciale, Atti Riservati, B.206, n. 514 (12 April 1848).

34. Ibid.

35. Steven C. Hughes, *Crime, Disorder, and the Risorgimento: The Politics of Policing in Bologna* (Cambridge 1994), 153–4.

36. Enrico Bottrigari, *Cronaca di Bologna*, ed. Aldo Berselli, vol. 1 (Bologna, 1961), 76–7; ASB, Direzione Provinciale, Titolo X, R.2, f. 11480 (29 June 1847); f. 16984 (6 September 1847).

37. Ibid., f. 1967 (9 December 1846); see also f. 5842 (undated, but March 1847) for an account in which a crowd of unemployed cheered Pius IX immediately before being scattered by the arrival of his troops.

38. ASB, Direzione Provinciale, Titolo X, R.2, f. 4981 (6 December 1846); f. 36613 (21 November 1847); f. 157 (22 February 1847); f. 333 (28 February 1847); f. 829 (27 July 1847); f. 9849 (5 October 1847).

39. Archivio di Stato di Roma, Miscellanei Rapporti Politici, B.195 (8 May 1837).

40. Ibid., 15, 22, and 29 May 1837.

41. Ibid., f. 1044 (19 October 1845).

42. Ibid., f. 18434 (25 August 1853).

43. Ibid., f. 18 (9 January 1854).

44. Ibid., f. 596 (9 January 1854); f. 9373 (8 May 1854).
45. Ibid., f. 13 (13 April 1849).
46. Ibid., f. 5576 (14 March 1853).
47. Ibid., f. 866 (12 January 1854); f. 923 (14 January 1854); f. 26 (8 March 1849).
48. Ibid., f. 382 (29 December 1849); f. 702 (12 January 1854). Presumably this insistence was based also on the practical consideration that the overseer would then have to declare that the work had indeed been carried out.
49. Ibid., f. 18223 (12 December 1848).
50. Ibid., f. 18754 (16 August 1854).
51. Ibid., f. 152 (16 February 1854).
52. Ibid., f. 1966 (26 January 1854).
53. Ibid., f. 3914 (15 March 1849).
54. Ibid., f. 121 (28 February 1854); f. 81 (13 February 1847); f. 221 (1 March 1849); f. 1374 (19 January 1854); f. 52 (19 January 1855).
55. Ibid., f. 7225 (22 May 1848).
56. Ibid., f. 5842 (March 1847).
57. Ibid., f. 20361 (15 September 1853).
58. As with the existence of the *braccianti* altogether, these structures were new not in their form but in their rapid growth at this time.

Since workers were paid through the *caporali*, who received a lump sum for the entire enterprise, *caporali* could be unscrupulous in cutting corners. One teenager arrested en route for not having the proper papers pleaded that his boss had promised to handle such problems and keep him out of legal trouble. The entire system also bore strong similarities to the *padrone* system among Italian immigrant workers in the US, which would be denounced for its abuses later in the century. See Donna Gabaccia, *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (New Brunswick 1988), ch. 5, and Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870–1945* (Chapel Hill 1997), ch. 2.

59. Carlo Travaglini, *Analisi di un'agitazione contadina nella campagna romana all'epoca della Restaurazione* (Rome 1981), 26–7. Domenico Demarco refers to a similar division but with the addition of 'monelli', a group consisting exclusively of women, children and the elderly. *Il tramonto dello Stato Pontificio: Il papato di Gregorio XIV* (Naples 1992), 72–3. For gangs in Bologna later in the nineteenth century, see Zappi, *If Eight Hours Seem too Few*.

60. Zappi, *If Eight Hours Seem too Few*; Faccini, *Uomini e lavoro*, 15–16; Faccini, *L'economia risicola*, 36–43.

61. 'Delle risaie e dei loro pessimi effetti', quoted in Faccini, *Uomini e lavoro*, 107–8.

62. 'Notificazione sulle Risaie', in *Raccolta delle più interessanti disposizioni*. *Le mondine*, the women who worked in ricefields, soon developed a colourful reputation. Their own songs countered the image of the meek and resigned rural woman: 'Anche per quest'anno, ragazze, ci han fregato' — 'They screwed us this year too, girls', or, 'Addio morettin, ti lascio, finita è la mondoda . . . tengo un altro amante a casa più bellino assai di te . . . tu credevi ch'io ti amassi invece t'ho ingannato' — 'Goodbye my dark little boy, the weeding is done, I'm leaving you . . . I have another lover at home a lot more handsome than you . . . you thought I loved you, but I tricked you instead.'

63. In Baricella, for instance, a fight broke out when *Campuesani* from Alberino continued to work through a call to stop, until impeded by others from Baricella, Boschi, Passo Segni and S. Gabriele. ASB, Direzione Provinciale, Titolo X, R.2, f. 18754 (16 August 1854).

64. Ibid., f. 433 (21 June 1847).

65. Ibid., f. 313 (11 April 1845).

66. Ibid., f. 32 (29 March 1847).

67. Ibid., f. 183 (15 September 1853).

68. For instance, ASB, Tribunale Civile e Criminale, Processi ricevuti 15 March 1849, No. 469.

69. Ibid., f. 20476 (19 September 1853).

70. Ibid., f. 183 (15 September 1853).

71. This article is drawn from a larger project which examines the nature and extent of collective action in the Bolognese more generally during this era.

Dora M. Dumont

is Assistant Professor at the State University of New York at Oneonta.