

I argue that class is a ritualised discursive field in which the signification of the markers used by people in their definitions of social position are the outcome of intense negotiations, not only between individuals with differing claims to status tokens but between individuals and the field of symbols. In other words, these negotiations are not only strategically positional as such, between one person and another, but initially consist of individual dialogues with relatively well-defined notions of space, time and agency. The dialogues are ritualised: they follow rules and adhere to formulaic models that together impose limits on access to some symbols and on possible outcomes. I argue that they are ritualised to allow new significations to emerge, which in turn enter into the delicate negotiations between individuals regarding status. People's notions of what they mean by 'class' and what they mean in particular by *borghese* are the result of one set of such negotiations, which establish the outlines of temporary 'status-scapes' (*pace* Appadurai) that determine future exchanges.

There is another reason why negotiations between an individual and the past, the rhetorical figure of the family, and Italian language itself are ritualised. Italy has never developed institutional spaces ideologically linked to national foundation myths comparable to what, in other Western European countries and in North America, are popularly called 'political traditions' or 'social traditions' that are allegedly shared across local, regional and class boundaries. In other words, it never developed national myths of sufficient strength to transform fully individuals into citizens. Italy is the creation of a military conquest by one of its northern elites. In its relatively brief political history, Italy has suffered three and arguably four civil wars: one at the time of unification with the fall of the Neapolitan Bourbons; another immediately after the First World War,<sup>1</sup> another immediately after the Second World War in the north as some Communist partisan groups switched their attention from Nazis to class enemies; and the fourth in the 1970s when the Red Brigades and similar left-leaning revolutionary and anarchistic movements (more middle class than proletarian) and homologous extreme right-wing organisations adopted a strategy of polarisation, which meant bombs set off in public places and assassinating whoever had the misfortune to be identified as a member of or in sympathy with the ruling elites of the Right and Left, which, not surprisingly, turned out to be a very elastic category in practice.<sup>2</sup> None of these

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<sup>1</sup> Tens of thousands were killed in the first; "3,000 – 4,000" between 1919 and 1922 (Banti 1996:337); and perhaps 4,000 between 1944 and 1946.

<sup>2</sup> Twenty years after the fact, it is now widely believed that not all terrorist acts during this period were committed by the Red Brigades. Right wing groups were also involved.

tumultuous and bloody events is usually described as such in textbooks and in popular discourse (in chronological order, they are referred to as periods of "brigandage", two periods of "political unrest", and "social unrest"), and certainly any discussion of their social and political effects on the creation and meaning of national charter myths is completely taboo in the popular press and, until recently, in academic circles. Italy has also changed its boundaries significantly during its history, with acquisitions (after the First World War) in the north and losses in the northeast (after World War II) and in the northwest (after unification).

There are many bourgeoisies in Rome. They can be distinguished by their origins, professional status and power base: 1) the descendants of northern builders and engineers who arrived in Rome from Turin and Milan after unification, whose accumulated capital and status resulting from government-sponsored building booms in the 1880s and in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were passed on to their descendants, often professionals and bureaucrats; 2) the descendants of the petty aristocracy who sided with the national government after unification and engaged in financial speculation in the same building booms that enriched the northern immigrants and whose descendants are in the professions or in government service; 3) the urban descendants of landowners based in the area surrounding Rome (the *Agro Romano*) whose primary income during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century derived from *mezzadria*, sharecropping, and raising draught horses (demand rose as a result of the building projects that enriched northern builders who came to Rome after 1870), whose descendants are in the professions and in politics; 4) the descendants of a 19<sup>th</sup> century rural bourgeoisie (perhaps the most important component of the post-unification bourgeoisie; cf. Vidotto 2000:19) whose primary income derived from their position as middlemen in the commerce between the countryside and the city, whose descendants are mostly in commerce and trade; 5) the descendants of rural overseers in large *mezzadria* holdings in the agricultural Pontifical States outside the *Agro Romano* (mostly in Abruzzo,

Umbria and Marche regions) whose descendants are also in commerce and trade;<sup>3</sup> 6) the descendants (today in politics and in the bureaucracy) of Southern bureaucrats who migrated to Rome at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and especially at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a result the State policy that aimed at integrating the surviving middle and upper-middle classes of the Kingdom of Naples into the Roman government, the better to 'solve' the so-called Southern 'question';<sup>4</sup> 7) recently, financial entrepreneurs from diverse class and regional origins whose pre-1992<sup>5</sup> political contacts have allowed them to make huge profits from government-sponsored investment activities, and, after 1992, 8) recently-emerged financial entrepreneurs (the Roman equivalent of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who is from Milan) whose political contacts in the so-called "Second Republic" have allowed them to make huge profits from state-owned resources placed on the marketplace as a result of privatisation (for example, the creation of

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<sup>3</sup> The geographical co-ordinates are an important distinguishing trait compared to the Lazio origin of the rural merchant bourgeoisie around Rome. These regions were less influenced by Vatican Counter-Reformation policies and were significantly limited in their capacity to generate wealth compared to the *Agro Romano*: having less to exploit, people in these regions developed a relatively more egalitarian view of relationships among themselves. The people of Lazio, on the other hand, were generally poor because they were caught in a Byzantine hierarchy of exploitation linked to the Church and naturally become more sensitive to local status differences.

<sup>4</sup> De Rita has heavily criticised (1996:38) this class on the basis that they brought their 'southern' culture of immobility and superficiality with them, with negative results for the development of the entrepreneurial spirit necessary for the formation of a 'true' bourgeoisie. Although this criticism echoes the widespread ideological biases against the South, there may be something to De Rita's observation: southerners recruited into the State bureaucracy no doubt correctly realised that the immediate aim of their recruitment by the northern-dominated government was to add weight to the State presence in Rome as well as integrate southerners into State practices; their efficiency, like the efficiency of their northern-born colleagues, was a secondary consideration. Why should they shoulder the risk of potential criticism for unpopular decisions when non-southern bureaucrats were reluctant to do so? Another example of the ideological nature of prejudice towards the South: many Italian ideologues (political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists) have accused the South of having an archaic political culture based on clientelism that has contaminated Italian political practices. One particular political manifestation of corruption that is often cited is the Italian system of proportional rather than direct representation, which allows more back-room deals to be cut since Members of parliament are not directly answerable to the citizens of their ridings. However, this system was introduced, by a government dominated by northerners, as a result of the electoral reform of 1882 to stop the clientelism that had pervaded the older system created and manned by northerners. The shift to 'irresponsible government' (proportional representation by means of lists of *potential* candidates rather than a slate of *actual* candidates; the number of candidates selected from the list depends on the proportion of votes obtained by the entire list) meant a decentralisation of power, which was no longer concentrated in so few hands (Romanelli 1985:322). In other words, a feature often attributed to southern pollution of northern purity was in fact pushed through Parliament by some concerned northerners to put an end to corruption by northerners of a northern-ruled and northern-manned system. A perhaps-unforeseen consequence of the system is the weakening of identifiable points of power and responsibility within the political system, but this has nothing to do with Southern political and cultural practices.

<sup>5</sup> 1992 was the year of the *mani pulite* ('clean hands') scandal, in which corruption trials allegedly brought an end to the old system of clientelism and brokerage.

Telecom Italia in 1994);<sup>6</sup> 9) finally, the descendants, mostly professionals, whose ancestors were professionals in pre-unification Papal Rome. They are commonly known (and describe themselves as) the 'old' bourgeoisie or the 'upper' bourgeoisie, the *alta borghesia*. It is this latter category that will be the subject of this book, though I stress once again that it is not a hermetic social category as such.<sup>7</sup>

### The bourgeois state

There is no doubt that in Western countries the presence of a state, *the State*, in liberal-democratic discourses gives 'bourgeois' its semantic valence in the politics of social positioning by citizens. However, its original and, perhaps one can say, underlying meaning was developed in other contexts that in the past were politicised by completely different processes. For many people living in England, Germany and France, bourgeois today means middle class, and middle class refers to a category of largely urban people whose livelihood, social status and politics are tightly linked to capitalist markets and liberal ideologies, since it is the presence of modern state formations that transformed the merchants and artisans of early modern Europe and of the late Middle Ages (after 1300) into the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie as such when the term acquired its social referents still in use today.

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<sup>6</sup> I hesitate to include this category in the list because many of them do not describe themselves as bourgeois but as 'entrepreneurs' in the 'new economy'; it is noteworthy that the only clearly entrepreneurial category in this list is often not considered 'truly' bourgeois by many people because it is tainted by political alliances and is too new. I have little information on this group. De Rita (1996:51) offers an interesting hypothesis on their origin as a class. He suggests that they were created by former Prime Minister Bettino Craxi (Silvio Berlusconi's friend, political ally and fellow Milanese), who in the 1980s became Italy's longest-ruling Prime Minister (nearly five years). Craxi realised that Italy's weakness as a national entity was due to the weakness of the bourgeoisie. He thus encouraged the growth of an emerging sector (stock market, finance, high technology and communications) in order to develop a new political base not only for himself but to accelerate the growth of a new political basis for national unity. Craxi was eventually tried and condemned in absentia (in 1993) for bribery and corruption, and his Socialist Party disintegrated as a result. Corrupt politician or statesman? Opinions were neatly polarised in the television and newspaper retrospectives following his death in exile in 2000. One thing is certain: the new bourgeois sector whose growth he encouraged by his *laissez-faire* attitude to the new economy (whose growth was, paradoxically, strongly dependant on government contacts and contracts) is now a strong economic and political presence. Silvio Berlusconi, himself a self-described self-made entrepreneur, reaped the benefits sowed by Craxi in the recent elections (13 May 2001).

<sup>7</sup> This is my list; however, given what I have written earlier, it is impossible to confirm or invalidate such a listing. As a measure of the complexity of the problem, in a dialogue with Giuseppe De Rita, Antonio Galdo mentions (1996:6) that the Italian (and not Roman) bourgeoisie has three different origins, owners of large agricultural holdings, entrepreneurs, and professionals, but mentions four types of petty bourgeoisie that he labels middle class.

This evolution was largely the outcome of the institutionalisation of liberal-democratic ideals as modern Western European states consolidated their control over economic and social processes within their frontiers after the tumultuous popular uprisings and protests of 1848, a process that had started in the 16th century with the Reformation and ended with the creation of an intimate and powerful link between state institutions and the destiny of small and large independent providers of goods and services who believe in individual autonomy and in a relatively free market. This set the stage for the political tension that still marks modern Western nations, even though the original opposition has been attenuated by the massive development of productive forces in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and mythified by nationalist ideologies, which are largely the frozen values, ideals and negotiated practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeoisie: on the one hand, a growing tendency towards state appropriation of power aided by the social fragmentation associated with a growing free-market economy and by the need to create political conditions favouring industrial investment and easy movement of goods and capital, and, on the other, a demand for bourgeois political and economic 'rights' that came to inspire non-bourgeois political demands in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In Italy, however, 'middle class' and *borghese* are two distinct categories, though there is overlap in their membership. *Borghese*, especially the old, upper-middle class,<sup>8</sup> includes mostly professionals in the humanistic tradition – lawyers, doctors, professors, engineers, architects – while the middle class includes people who, in English, have 'jobs' or 'careers' in more technical fields for which university degrees are not necessary – accountants, merchants, bureaucrats, surveyors, and so on. Lawyers, for example, are ideally not specialists who deal in technical points of the law but professionals who act as "well-to-do and cultured gentlemen [*gallantuomo*, about which see the section below on *perbenismo*]" (Sankaran 1991, cited in Socrate 1999). In other words, *borghesi* are defined as professionals operating within a humanistic cultural framework while the middle class is composed of professionals whose social identity derives from and makes reference to qualities of economic merit and technical progress; in simple terms, the first is a self-defined *cultural* meritocracy and the second a self-defined *social* meritocracy. In practical terms, the traditional distinguishing feature for most *borghesi* is the *laurea*, the 4-year bachelor's degree, though this has no longer been a sharp dividing line between professionals and

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<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise specified, from now on *borghese* or bourgeois will refer to the old bourgeoisie historically associated with the Papal States.

technicians since the reforms of the 1970s that opened up universities to everyone.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, *borghese* was not associated with the definition of 'capitalist' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Italy, and only in the north was this generally true, *borghese* did not overlap significantly with 'capitalist' until the period between the wars (Socrate 1999:381). The old Roman bourgeoisie, which developed its cultural markers in three phases – between the late Papal period (roughly 1848 till 1870), in the first decades following the unification of Italy (1870-1890), and in the Fascist epoch (1922 –1944) – still look down on mercantile activity. Their investments tend to be in housing, real estate, or combining a professional service with investment in building (for example, owning one's own medical clinic or medical laboratory). Recently, there has been some diversification among the Roman bourgeoisie, and a few bourgeois own golf clubs (which are very much still an upper-middle class phenomenon in Italy) or high-tech personal fitness centres. Most still shy away from real estate development (because it is necessary to have political contacts, which are often disdained) and the stock market, which is still largely controlled by northern cartels; most *borghesi* prefer to augment their professional income from renting out urban property.

Nineteenth and twentieth century discourses favouring individual liberty and calls for a free market are, of course, rhetorical positions that have long provided the bourgeoisie with an advantageous political leverage vis-à-vis other social classes, largely because they have been better positioned to profit from these political stances by reason of their cultural baggage and by their penetration of state institutionalised practices. It can be argued (and it has) that the

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<sup>9</sup> Many professors, as well as the Ministry of Universities, maintain that the 4 year degree is equivalent to a North American or English M.A. because Italian students must write an honours thesis, in contrast to most undergraduate degrees in North America. Until 1981, the *laurea* (which gives its possessor the right to be called *dottore*, 'doctor') was the highest degree granted in Italy. Students wishing to do graduate work to enter the academic professions obtained a bursary, usually for 3 years, that allowed them to develop an academic specialisation with no formal supervision. Following the popular protests of 1968, university enrolments were liberalised; at the time, admissions were open though some specialisations – medicine, architecture and engineering – have since decided that an open admissions policy does not work for them. Many new universities were founded, though obviously this created major staffing problems, which set the stage for the politicisation and inequities of the contemporary recruitment process; see Lanoue (1999).

bourgeoisification of modern states<sup>10</sup> is not a historical process in the usual, common-sense connotation of something both inevitable and the outcome of depersonalised forces (as many officially-sanctioned histories have it), since it was the political desires and activities of the Western European middle classes seeking more entrepreneurial elbow room, combined with attempts to accrue and limit privileges to their own class, that became inscribed in liberal-democratic state ideologies and furnished a model for less advanced states (meaning, with a smaller entrepreneurial sector) not only in Europe but for the rest of the world as well.<sup>11</sup> All modern states to a lesser or greater extent derive (sometimes unwillingly) their practices of power and ideological control from these largely nineteenth-century western-European bourgeois rhetorics and values, although of course the political projects, often post-colonial, of lesser players are not identical to those of the major states such as England, France and Germany where political modernity was first forged.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the rhetorics of the Western bourgeoisie, enshrined and inscribed in popular tropes by various middle-class revolutions and coup d'etats over the last two centuries,<sup>13</sup> have slowly drifted from their immediate political and especially economic contexts, causing a semiotic shift towards signifieds that are not necessarily markers of privilege as such: good table manners, proper speech or 'received' pronunciation, a discourse of repressed sexuality, the right

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<sup>10</sup> In Italy, a term made popular by Pier Paolo Pasolini, who used it in a slightly different context. Pasolini was interested in the plight of the urban lower classes who Mussolini and post-War property developers had forced out of Rome and into the *borgate*, the satellite cities (not necessarily bedroom communities in the sense of some North American suburbs) that had been planned (but very often not) to relieve the demand for housing by immigrants to Rome, whose population has grown by a factor of nearly 13 from 1870 to 2001. He denounced Italian bourgeoisification – removing poor people from their historic urban roots and giving them only the trappings of lower middle class respectability ('modern' housing) while lowering their political presence on the national scene – as a form of class genocide.

<sup>11</sup> Until the First World War, voters were property owners in most Western states. In England in 1960, one had to be a ratepayer (i.e., property owner) to borrow books from public libraries; otherwise, one had to get a ratepayer to act as guarantor!

<sup>12</sup> It should be obvious that when I speak of history here I am not invoking any form of intellectual or ideological authority for my affirmations; I am speaking of accepted views of history and of Italian ideas of historical processes.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to bourgeois rhetorics that shifts in political power appear evolutionary rather than revolutionary; hence I believe my use of coup d'etat to be correct even though various official and semi-official histories take pains to represent these shifts as a widening and strengthening of the democratic process.

schools and degrees, a respectable home address in a 'good' neighbourhood,<sup>14</sup> a proper pedigree of at least three of four generations, and, for the Roman bourgeoisie, *la campagna*, the *inherited* country estate. In other words, all these traits are *suggestive* of bourgeois breeding but not invariably so. They must be presented in such a way that their message of bourgeois identity is unequivocal, and bourgeois generally get the message across by making sure that all the traits are presented as a package; to be bourgeois means getting the details right.

The bourgeoisie's privileged position vis-à-vis state processes is everywhere being eroded by geopolitical and economic shifts associated with globalisation, further strengthening semiotic shifts leading to the creation of restricted metonymic fields such that the traditional markers of the bourgeoisie are by now more a starting point for strategic referencing in popular discourses rather than a lived reality. New elites are emerging. Because these elites are often linked to information technology rather than the traditional industrial and financial sectors, they do not see themselves as *borghese* as such. In brief, to be bourgeois no longer defines a particular relationship to power and privilege in narrow political and economic terms, and nowhere is this truer than in Rome where the political and economic conditions that defined other Western bourgeoisies never existed.

Class relations that in a sense opposed the bourgeoisie to aristocrats and especially to the lower-middle and working classes were framed by nationalist ideologies that everywhere in the West are today rendered increasingly irrelevant by large scale movements of people, capital, goods and ideas: even in the last 150 years preceding the onset of globalisation, no national bourgeoisies (or working classes, for that matter) were ever able to form international political coalitions of sufficient strength to overcome this nationalist ideological framework. If it is true that working classes everywhere were exploited by elites, they were exploited by *their* elites, and elites in Western Europe (which of course include the bourgeoisie) were so divided that they sent

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<sup>14</sup> Increasingly important as Roman urbanisation evolves according to a more North American or northern European model, and previously heterogeneous neighbourhoods, including the historic centre, are becoming segregated by income. This process started more than 20 years ago with the conversion of street-level artisan workshops and corner stores into luxury boutiques (especially the streets around tourist attractions such as via Condotti and via della Croce). Buildings previously owned by private individuals were bought by companies, who justified the massive increase in rents by renovations, driving out to the new (and distant) suburbs middle- and low-income families who had lived in the centre for generations. As little as 30 years ago chic and expensive addresses such as via Giulia (perhaps the 'best' address in the old centre) were predominantly middle- and low-income working class. The result was a twofold or threefold increase in property values downtown and in 'new' – because it is outside the city walls though considered downtown – neighbourhoods such as Prati. Cf. Golini (1999). This process has threatened the old



millions of people to their deaths in futile wars of national ascendancy.

During the period of greatest trade-union and anarchic agitation between 1848 and the First World War, various national working and bourgeois classes in the West eventually reached a tacit political and economic compromise (explicitly spelled out in labour law and in union contracts): in return for improved working conditions, the working classes renounced radical political action; for their part, capitalists (including the bourgeoisie, who usually identify with the interests of capitalists though they may not be capitalist as such) grudgingly agreed to the controlled introduction of technological innovation in the workplace and to limits on competition, especially through antitrust legislation and improved working conditions. In other words, rates of accumulation and reproduction of capital were slightly reduced in return for political stability in which capitalists and bourgeois could enjoy their social and economic privileges. This compromise had perforce to take account of national contexts because market conditions and rates of technological innovation varied from country to country and because its enactment required concerted political action at the national level by lower-class trade unions and middle- and upper class liberal reformers. In brief, nationalist ideologies and their attendant political practices won over any tendencies towards international class consciousness and class unity, reinforcing political myths of the primacy of the bourgeoisie in the creation of the modern nation-state.

Because of the presence of the Vatican, Rome's bourgeoisie did not resemble its counterparts in other Western nations, especially in some fundamental areas such as placing a high value on individualism, relatively open markets, education, control of political institutions and class mobility. These differences between the Roman and other national bourgeoisies are even more marked today, when drastic changes to the Italian political and cultural scene – many inspired by Europeanisation, others by globalisation, and still others by a concomitance of local factors – have produced new elites that claim the political status of bourgeois while rejecting many of the cultural values once attached to the term. The Roman bourgeoisie as a cultural category may be dead or dying or may have even been stillborn, but the models of cultural space and social behaviour attached to this idea are still very much alive if only as reference points against which new elites position themselves.

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bourgeoisie, who can often afford to live in expensive neighbourhoods but feel uncomfortable about markers of privilege shifting from inherited culture to social tokens that can be bought.