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# The history of the subaltern groups: Rome and the Middle Ages in Italy

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## **Abstract**

Given the international interest, debate and controversy on questions of the subaltern classes and of relationships of hegemony, it has been thought useful to present here a number of sections (conventionally called paragraphs) from the Prison Notebooks that are as yet awaiting publication in an English translation. They will of course come out in Joseph Buttigieg's ongoing project of the translation in their entirety of the Gerratana edition of the Notebooks, and publication of some of Gramsci's first drafts of the pieces here included are imminent. In other cases, however, the first drafts by Gramsci, especially the paragraphs discussing Ettore Ciccotti's articles, have actually been published in the second volume of the Buttigieg edition,<sup>1</sup> not to mention of course editions in languages other than English. Apart from Gramsci's general discussion of the emergence of the subaltern classes and their struggle for recognition and even some sort of hegemony, what readers may find of further interest is the way in which he reworks and elaborates his arguments either in detail or at the level of what often appear relatively minor specifications.

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## **The history of the subaltern groups: Rome and the Middle Ages in Italy**

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### **Introduction**

Given the international interest, debate and controversy on questions of the subaltern classes and of relationships of hegemony, it has been thought useful to present here a number of sections (conventionally called paragraphs) from the *Prison Notebooks* that are as yet awaiting publication in an English translation. They will of course come out in Joseph Buttigieg's ongoing project of the translation in their entirety of the Gerratana edition of the Notebooks, and publication of some of Gramsci's first drafts of the pieces here included are imminent. In other cases, however, the first drafts by Gramsci, especially the paragraphs discussing Ettore Ciccotti's articles, have actually been published in the second volume of the Buttigieg edition,<sup>1</sup> not to mention of course editions in languages other than English. Apart from Gramsci's general discussion of the emergence of the subaltern classes and their struggle for recognition and even some sort of hegemony, what readers may find of further interest is the way in which he reworks and elaborates his arguments either in detail or at the level of what often appear relatively minor specifications.

The translated texts we present here are the result of a translation workshop coordinated by Derek Boothman at the Advanced School of Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators (SSLMIT) at the Forlì campus of the University of Bologna, as part of the requirements for a first year course for a Master's degree in translation. To the best of our knowledge, the texts have not yet been translated. Since they are taken from different *Notebooks* and do not follow a chronological order of writing, other criteria have been established to present them.

After a methodological preface (see below), the other paragraphs chosen represent a reflection on different historical periods in Italy. The discussion deals with the question of the presence and role of intellectuals in Rome and their historical importance for the peninsula, commenting marginally on what the term "Italy" actually has meant historically. It then moves on to comment more in general on the notion of "Great Power" and the importance of catholic Christianity in strengthening the nation. Different social groups are taken into consideration, from the highest level of the social hierarchy, such as intellectuals — with reference to their role in ancient times — to subaltern social groups, that is to say slaves (in Rome), the "people", and the "commoners" of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

As noted above, the historical paragraphs are preceded by two methodological comments from the short but highly important Notebook 25, one of the last (mid to late 1934) that Gramsci was able to write, and entitled by him "*Ai margini della storia. (Storia dei gruppi sociali subalterni)*" ["On the margins of history. (History of the subaltern social groups)"]. One paragraph (Notebook 25, paragraph 5: Q25§5), dealing with the importance of the subaltern social groups and classes and

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci. *Prison Notebooks* (1996). New York: Columbia University Press, Vol. II, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg.

consequentially of the need to study them, is specific to the subject matter here, while the other (Q25§2), of a more general nature, is available in a first draft (Q3§14) in Vol. II of Buttigieg's edition.<sup>2</sup> The reason for including here the alternative, later, version is that, in a few extra lines, it adds considerably to the original,<sup>3</sup> by comparing the version here and Joseph Buttigieg's translation, one sees how Gramsci re-thought, re-worked and enriched his notes. A couple of additional things should be noted about Q25§2. This final version uses the wording "subaltern social groups" (for purposes either of generalization or to avoid censorship problems) instead of the earlier "subaltern classes" (as also does Q25§4, see below), and the "dominant class" of the original version is replaced by "dominant groups" in Q25§2. The heading is likewise modified from Gramsci's original "History of the dominant class and history of the subaltern classes" to his more general "Methodological criteria". As regards the relatively long Q25§4 and its first drafts, Q3§16 and Q3§18, there are two significant differences and one added sentence, all commented in the footnotes, but the rest is almost word-for-word the same, except for an added final part of the Q25 version, summarised in a footnote. Square brackets in the translations indicate translators' glosses and other interventions, whereas angled brackets are used to indicate later additions that Gramsci made to his own notes.

## The Translated Texts

### Q25§2

#### *Methodological Criteria.*

The history of the subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. It is undoubtedly the case that in the historical activity of these classes there is a tendency toward unification albeit in the provisional stages, but this tendency is continually broken up through the initiative of the dominant groups, and therefore can be demonstrated only at the termination of a historical cycle, if this cycle ends in success. The subaltern groups are subject to the initiative of the dominant groups, even when they rebel and are in revolt; only "permanent" victory breaks their subordination,<sup>4</sup> and this does not happen immediately. In actual fact, even when they seem to be triumphant, the subaltern groups are only in a state of anxious defense (this truth may be demonstrated by the example of the French Revolution at least up until 1830). Every trace of autonomous initiative is therefore of inestimable value for the integral historian; the consequence is thus such a history may be dealt with only by monographs and that every monograph requires a very large accumulation of materials often difficult to assemble.

### Q25§5

#### *Methodological Criteria.*

The historical unity of the leading classes comes about in the State and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of States. But one must not believe that this unity is

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<sup>2</sup> Of the other paragraphs in Notebook 25, not included here, the justly famous one on David Lazzaretti and his sect-cum-movement (Q25§1) is in *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1996), edited and trans. by Derek Boothman, London: Lawrence and Wishart and Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, pp. 50-55 while Q25§3 is a mere bibliographical reference and the final paragraph (Q25§6) deals with the positivist criminologist Cesare Lombroso.

<sup>3</sup> Q25§4, which we also include here, is on the other hand to all intents and purposes the same as its first draft, Q3§16, except for a small but significant addition in the final version of one phrase (see the text and footnote 12).

<sup>4</sup> The noun "*subordinazione*" ("subordination") occurs 21 times in the Notebooks, while "*subalternità*" ("subalternity") occurs just once. Doubt might therefore be expressed about whether apparently equivalent concepts such as "subordinate" and "subaltern" in Gramsci are in fact synonymous; against this, the situation as regards the corresponding adjectives is far less asymmetrical. In contrast to the conditions of being subaltern/subordinate the nouns "*egemonia*"/"*egemonie*" ("hegemony"/"hegemonies") occur 287 times for the singular and 10 times for the plural. The fundamental asymmetry between hegemony (exercised) and subalternity (undergone) is thus reflected even at the linguistic level.

purely juridical and political, even though this form of unity has its importance and is not merely formal in nature: the basic historical unity, through its concrete nature, is the result of the organic relationships between State or political society and “civil society”. The subaltern classes by definition are not unified and cannot unify until they become a “State”; their history is therefore interwoven with civil society, it is a “disaggregated” and discontinuous function of the history of civil society and, by way of this, of the history of States and of groups of States. One must therefore study: 1) the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, through the development and upheavals that take place in the world of economic production, their quantitative expansion and their origin in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and goals for a certain length of time they continue to conserve; 2) their active or passive adherence to the dominant political formations, the attempts to influence the programs of these formations in order to impose their own demands and the consequences that these attempts have in determining the processes of decomposition and renewal or of giving rise to a new formation; 3) the birth of new parties of the dominant groups in order to maintain the consent of and control over the subaltern groups; 4) the formation itself of the subaltern groups for demands of a restricted and partial nature; 5) the new formations that assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups albeit within the old frameworks; 6) the formations that assert integral autonomy etc.

Q8§22. *History of the intellectuals. Points for research.*

Plato's *Republic*. When it is said that Plato favoured a “republic of philosophers”, the term philosophers should be interpreted “historically”, that is to say it should be translated “intellectuals” (obviously Plato referred to the “great intellectuals”, who were moreover the type of intellectuals of his time, besides giving importance to the specific content of intellectuality, which in concrete terms could be called “religiosity”: in other words the intellectuals in government were those closest to religion, whose activity had a religious character, which is to be meant both in its general meaning of that time and in Plato's special meaning, and thus, in a certain sense, a “social” activity of elevation and education of the polis <and of intellectual direction, and therefore of a hegemonic function> of the polis). It might therefore be argued that Plato's “utopia” is a forerunner of Medieval feudalism, with the function that in that system is performed by the Church and the ecclesiastics, who represented the intellectual category during that phase of socio-historical development. Plato's aversion to “artists” is thus to be understood as an aversion to “individualistic” spiritual activities which tend to the “particular” and are thus “a-religious” and “a-social”.

*The intellectuals in the Roman Empire*. The mutation in the condition of the social position of the intellectuals in Rome from the time of the Republic to the Empire (from an aristocratic-corporate regime to a democratic-bureaucratic one), is linked to Caesar who granted citizenship to physicians and teachers of the liberal arts to encourage them to be more willing to live in Rome and to persuade others to come there: *Omnesque medicinam Romae professos et liberalium artium doctores, quo libentius et ipsi urbem incolerent et coeteri appeterent civitate donavit* [“He conferred citizenship on all who practised medicine in Rome, and on all teachers of the liberal arts, to make them more desirous of living in the city and to induce others to resort to it”]: Suetonius, *Life of Caesar, XLII*.<sup>5</sup> Caesar therefore proposed: 1) to have the intellectuals who already lived in Rome settle there, in order to create a permanent category of intellectuals, as without their permanence no cultural organization could be created. Prior to this, there must have been a fluctuation which had to be stopped etc.; 2) to attract to Rome the best intellectuals of the entire Roman Empire, thus promoting a centralisation of great importance. This is how the category of

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<sup>5</sup> The English is quoted from Suetonius's *The Lives of the Caesars, Book I. The Deified Julius*, Vol. 1. London and Cambridge (Mass.): Heinemann (Loeb Classical Library), 1964 (first published 1913), paragraph XLII, p.58 and 59 for the original and translation respectively. Different editions of the Latin text may give different spellings of a number of words, according to whether the quotation is reproduced in classical, or in late, Latin.

“imperial” intellectuals was created in Rome, which was to be continued in the catholic clergy and to leave many traces in the entire history of Italian intellectuals, with their characteristic “cosmopolitanism”, up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Q13§15.

In the notion of great power, we have also to consider the element of “internal calm”, meaning the degree and intensity of the hegemonic function of the leading social group (This element is to be sought when assessing the power of each single State, but it gains even more importance when considering the great powers. Nor is it necessary to recall the history of Ancient Rome and its internecine struggles which did not stop its victorious expansion, etc. In addition to the other differential elements, suffice it to consider this factor: Rome was the only great power of the time and, after the destruction of Carthage, it had no need to fear the competition of powerful rivals). Thus, it could be said that the stronger the police apparatus, the weaker the army, and that the weaker (i.e. relatively useless) the police, the stronger the army (when faced with the prospect of an international conflict).

Q25§4. *Some general notes on the historical development of the subaltern social groups in the Middle Ages and in Rome.*

In the essay by Ettore Ciccotti *Elementi di “verità” e di “certezza” nella tradizione storica romana* [“Elements of ‘truth’ and ‘certainty’ in Roman historical tradition”]<sup>6</sup> (in the volume *Confronti storici* [Historical comparisons]) there are a number of comments on the historical development of the popular classes in the Italian Communes,<sup>7</sup> which are particularly noteworthy and deserve a separate treatment. The wars among the rival Communes and consequently the necessity to recruit a more vigorous and numerous military force by arming the greatest number possible, gave the commoners [*popolani*]<sup>8</sup> consciousness of their power and at the same time these factors consolidated the commoners’ ranks (in functioning as a stimulus to the compact and united, solidaristic formation of group and party). The combatants stayed united even in peace, both to make their services available and, subsequently, with increasing solidarity, for purposes of particular utility. The characteristics of their union and the way in which they were constituted emerge from the statutes of the “*Società d’armi*” [“Armed Societies”], which developed in Bologna, as it seems, around 1230. Towards the middle of the XIII century there were already twenty-four such societies, distributed according to the city district where their members lived (the components). In addition to their political duty of external defense of the Commune, their purpose was to assure every commoner the necessary protection against the aggressions of the nobles and the powerful. The chapters of their statutes – for example the one of the “*Società detta dei Leoni*” [“the so-called Lions’ Society”] — have as their heading titles such as: «*De adiutorio dando hominibus dicte societatis...*» [“On the aid to be given to the men of this society ...”]; «*Quod molestati iniuste debeant adiuvari ab hominibus dicte societatis*» [“Regarding their unjust treatment, aid should be given to the men of this society ...”]. And in addition to civil and social

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<sup>6</sup> The distinction between the true and the certain comes from Vico: truth “is the object of knowledge (*scienza*) since it is universal and eternal, whereas [the certain], related as it is to human consciousness (*coscienza*), is particular and individuated. This produces two pairs of terms – *il vero/scienza* and *il certo/coscienza* – which constitute, in turn, the explananda of philosophy and philology (‘history’ broadly conceived), respectively. As Vico says, ‘philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain’ (Element X, §138, p.63)” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vico/>).

<sup>7</sup> Between “Commune” and “city state”, as readers will probably be aware, there is no difference; for consistency we have chosen “Commune”.

<sup>8</sup> Here we follow Joseph Buttigieg in choosing “commoners” as a translation of “*popolani*” since just “people”, as found, for instance, in some translations of Machiavelli’s *History of Florence* seems too generic for Gramsci’s conceptual terms. One must then examine the specific situation to see how far “down” in the social structure the “*popolani*” stretch – artisan companies or lower.

sanctions, as well as the oath, a religious sanction was also added, implying a common hearing of the mass and celebrating the divine offices, while other common duties, shared by pious confraternities,<sup>9</sup> such as assisting poor members, burying the dead etc., made the union more and more long-lasting and closely-bound. As far as the functions themselves of the societies were concerned, official positions and councils were formed – in Bologna, for example, there were four or eight «*ministeriales*» modelled on the Orders of the *Società delle Arti*<sup>10</sup> or on the more ancient ones of the Commune – that eventually assumed a value beyond the terms of the society and found their place in the constitution of the Commune.

Originally, *milites* on a par with *pedites*, nobles and commoners, although the former were less numerous, entered these societies. But gradually the *milites*, that is the nobility, tended to move away from them, as happened in Siena, or, sometimes, they could be expelled from them, as happened in 1270 in Bologna. As the movement for emancipation gained ground, going beyond the limits and form of these societies, the popular element demanded to take part in the most important public offices and succeeded in so doing. The people organized themselves more and more into an actual political party and, in order to make its action more efficient and more centralized, designated a leader, the «*Capitano del popolo*»,<sup>11</sup> an office that it seems Siena established following the model of Pisa, and that in its name just as in its role, revealed both its military and its political origins and functions. The people who had already at times, albeit sporadically, armed themselves<sup>12</sup> and had constituted themselves as a people and taken their own separate decisions, constituted themselves as an autonomous body with even the power of legislating for themselves. They had their own bell for convening meetings “*cum campana Communis non bene audiat*” [“the bell of the Commune not being well heard”].<sup>13</sup> They came into conflict with the Podestà,<sup>14</sup> whose right to make proclamations they contested and with whom the *capitano del popolo* stipulated “peace treaties”. When the people did not manage to obtain the desired reforms from the Communal authorities, they declared their secession, supported by some of the leading figures of the Commune. After setting up an independent assembly, they started creating their own magistracies, modelled on the general ones of the Commune. Moreover they gave jurisdictional powers to the *capitano del popolo*, and deliberated through his authority, and so in this way (as from 1255) a whole new legislative process was initiated. (These data come from the Commune of Siena.) The people succeeded, first in practice and then even formally, in having introduced into the General Statutes of the Commune, their dispositions which before were of internal use only in order to bind the formally registered members to the “People”. As a result, the people obtained control of the Commune, overcoming and overturning the previous ruling class, as happened in Siena after 1270, in Bologna with the “Sacred” and “Most Sacred” Orders, and in Florence with the “Orders of justice” (in Siena Provenzan Salvani was a noble who became the people’s leader.)

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<sup>9</sup> “A society of body of men united for some purpose, or in some profession; a brotherhood”.

<http://www.hyperdictionary.com/dictionary/confraternity>.

<sup>10</sup> The *Società delle Arti* were born spontaneously and freely on the initiative of traders and craftsmen with the aim of protecting their own interests and establishing prices and wages. <http://kidslink.bo.cnr.it/francia/3canali/seta/arti.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> In the medieval Communes, the government of the people was born in opposition to the oligarchy of the nobles and had the *Capitano del popolo* as its leader. <http://www.educational.rai.it/lemma/testi/cultura/popolo.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> The introduction of this phrase about the people arming itself is the only modification up to this point as compared with the first draft (Q3§16), which makes no mention at this point of bearing arms.

<sup>13</sup> The Latin is not without ambiguity and the translation suggested here is obviously to be understood figuratively, meaning the people had no wish to follow the decisions and dictates of the Commune.

<sup>14</sup> The Podestà was the executive officer who held full and complete administrative powers on a temporary basis.

Typically an educated citizen or noble brought from another city as a temporary substitute for the civic consultative assemblies during times of crisis, many were highly effective civic administrators that moved from town to town as their services were required.

Apart from those deriving from the impossibility of verifying the truth of “personal” episodes, such as that of Tanaquilla etc.,<sup>15</sup> most of the problems related to the history of Rome that Ciccotti analyses in his above-mentioned study refer to events and institutions of subaltern groups (tribune of the plebs, etc.). The method based on “analogy” theorized and argued by Ciccotti, therefore, can give us only some “indirect” results: the subaltern groups do not have political autonomy and their defensive initiatives are constrained by their own laws of necessity which are simpler,<sup>16</sup> more limited and politically more restrictive than those laws of historical necessity that lead and influence the initiatives of the dominant class. The subaltern groups often turn out to belong originally to a different race (another culture and another religion) from the dominant ones, and are often a mixture of different races, as in the case of the slaves.<sup>17</sup> The question of the importance of women in the history of Rome is similar to that of the subaltern groups, but with some differences: male supremacy can only in a certain sense be compared with the rule of a class and is, therefore, more important in the history of customs rather than in political and social history. [...]<sup>18</sup>

Q19§1. [Q19 is widely known as the Notebook on *The Italian Risorgimento*, but the heading is editorial, not that of Gramsci, who left it without a title, as he also did for its first paragraph.]

A double series of researches: one on the era of the Risorgimento and a second one regarding the preceding history that took place in the Italian peninsula, in that it produced the cultural elements that had their repercussion on the Risorgimento (both positive and negative repercussions) and still continue to function (albeit only as ideological elements of propaganda) even in Italian national life as it has been shaped by the Risorgimento itself. This second research should consist of a series of essays about the periods of European and world history that have had an affect on the peninsula. For example:

1) The different meanings of the word “Italy” throughout the different periods, inspired by the well-known essay by Prof. Carlo Cipolla (which should be completed and updated).

2) The period in Roman history which marks the shift from the Republic towards the Empire, in that it created the general framework of a number of ideological tendencies of the future Italian nation. It appears not to be clearly understood that it was actually Caesar and Augustus who actually changed radically the relative position of Rome and of the peninsula in the equilibrium of the classical world, taking “territorial” hegemony away from Italy and shifting power towards an “imperial”, in other words a supranational, class. And if it is true that Caesar continued and completed the democratic movement of the Gracchi, Marius and Catiline, it is also true that he won

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<sup>15</sup> Tanaquilla was the wife of Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, one of the Etruscan kings of Rome, and instrumental, it seems, in first encouraging him to aim at obtaining the kingship and then, after his death, ensuring that his son succeeded him; thus, for the first time, the Senate was by-passed in the institutional process.

<sup>16</sup> Gramsci seems to have had second thoughts here, since he changes his view from “more complex” to “simpler” laws in going from the first to the final draft. The next sentence, about subaltern groups often being of “another race” and culture appears in the final draft but not the initial one.

<sup>17</sup> A couple of paragraphs after the present one, i.e. in Q25§6, Gramsci says that the Roman Senate voted down a proposal to have slaves wear a uniform, since they would then begin to recognize themselves as such and thus be conscious of their numerical and hence potentially political strength (Seneca, *De clem.*, I, 24 and Tacitus, *Annali*, 4, 27). In a somewhat abbreviated form Q25§6 appears as Q3§98 and Q3§99, translated by J.A. Buttigieg, *op. cit.* pp. 95-6.

<sup>18</sup> The paragraph continues, but changes subject somewhat and deals with the dangers inherent in the method of arguing by historical analogy, going on more to discuss States, from which the slaves (and non-slave proletarians) in the classical (Western) world were excluded socio-politically, as were classes such as proletarians, glebe serfs and peasants in the mediaeval world. In the revolt of the Ciompi (wool carders) in mediaeval Florence, the demand they made to be assumed into the government of the Commune could not have been made for example by Spartacus in the slaves’ revolt in Rome. At this point, Gramsci goes into a brief discussion of social alliances between proletarians and “people”, or the people supporting the dictatorship of a Prince, completely different once again from anything that could have happened in the case of slaves in the classical world. He concludes with the words “the contemporary dictatorships abolish legally even these new forms of autonomy [of the subaltern classes] and attempt to incorporate them into state activity: the legal concentration of the whole of the life of the nation in the hands of the dominant group becomes ‘totalitarian’”.



because the problem that for Gracchi, for Marius and for Catiline was posed as one to be solved in the peninsula, in Rome, was posed by Caesar in the framework of the entire empire, of which the peninsula was one part and Rome its “bureaucratic” capital; and this was true only to a certain extent. This historical nexus is of the greatest importance for the history of the peninsula and of Rome since it is the beginning of their process of “denationalization” and of their becoming a “cosmopolitan terrain”. The Roman aristocracy which had unified the peninsula in the ways and with the means appropriate to the period, and created the basis for a national development, was overwhelmed by the imperial power and the problem that the aristocracy itself had created. The politico-historical knot was cut by Caesar with the sword and a new age began, in which the East had such a great weight that in the end it overwhelmed the West and brought about a rupture between the two parts of the Empire.

3) The Middle Ages, or Age of the Communes, when new social groups were formed molecularly in the cities without this process, however, reaching <in Italy> the highest phase of incubation such as it did in France, in Spain etc.

4) The age of mercantilism and of the absolute monarchies. In Italy the manifestations of this were of little national importance, as the country was under foreign influence. In the great European countries, instead, the new social groups in the cities, by entering powerfully into the national structure characterised by a unitary tendency, reinforced the structure itself and the Unitarian process. They also introduced a new equilibrium among the social forces and the conditions for a rapidly progressive development were created.

These essays must be conceived for a given public, with the aim of destroying antiquated, scholastic and rhetorical concepts, which have been passively absorbed from the prevailing ideas in a certain environment of popular<sup>19</sup> culture. They have, then, the task of arousing scientific interest in the issues treated, which will therefore be presented as living questions that also operate in the present, as forces in movement that are always actual.

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<sup>19</sup> The adjective here is “*popolaresca*” not the normal “*popolare*”; it tends more than “*popolare*” to convey an atmosphere of non-self reflecting culture, tending almost to a “folkloristic” approach.