

The Microfoundations of Italian Agrarianism: Italian Agricultural Economists and Fascism

FEDERICO D'ONOFRIO

By studying the theoretical and empirical work of agricultural economists in pre-World War I and interwar Italy, this article shows that agrarianism was a general paradigm shared across the Italian political spectrum by different political families. Originating in the agricultural crisis of the late nineteenth century, agrarianism was understood differently by different political groups, so that its political meaning changed over time, while the underlying economic principles remained stable. The “democratic agrarianism” of the first two decades of the twentieth century—an effort to increase the number of owner-farmers in the name of the “social utility” of land—evolved into the “productivist agrarianism” of the fascist period, when the regime tried to reconcile under a technocratic leadership the contrast between social issues and land productivity. It declared peasant farmers a protected category of subjects, and put the development of Italian agriculture under the tutelage of the state and its bureaucratic structure.

ON MAY 4, 1922, THE PRESENTATION of bill 742 in the Chamber of Deputies of Italian Parliament signaled the potential for radical reorganization of the nation's system of land tenure. The bill “on the reform of latifundia and internal colonization” contained provisions for the confiscation of *latifundia* lands (large landholdings) and assigned the confiscated land to peasants and peasant cooperatives, under the condition that they would transform barren expanses into well-cultivated fields. The bill, which came after years of debate, was a solution to the most crucial and acutely felt problem of the country: the fate of the peasantry. Parliament's failure to answer the demands of peasants had worked to undermine the constitutional order that emerged after the 1919 elections, the first elec-

FEDERICO D'ONOFRIO is senior Swiss National Science Foundation researcher at the Centre Walras-Pareto for the history of economic and political thought at the University of Lausanne. His main research interest is in the history of statistics and interwar agrarianism. He is the author of *Observing Agriculture in Early Twentieth-Century Italy: Agricultural Economists and Statistics* (Routledge, 2016).

tions with universal male suffrage and proportional representation. While socialists, Catholic *Popolari* (the People's Party), and nationalists of various stripes debated in Parliament, fascist *squadristi* (squads) raided socialist clubs, assassinated local administrators, and molested newspaper offices. This violence paved the way for constitutional crisis, the *Marcia su Roma*, and Benito Mussolini's take over. Italy's democratic system fell victim to the ruthless violence unleashed by conservative landlords and its own inability to transform the peasantry into a pillar of political stability.¹

Peasant friendly policies were an essential component of postwar stabilization in the wake of the Great War. From Germany to Romania and the Soviet Union to Spain, land reforms and internal colonization spread over the continent during the interwar period, though they did not always have the same meaning and objectives. In Central and Eastern Europe, transfers of ownership played a crucial role in what Charles S. Maier called the "recasting of bourgeois Europe." In the post-imperial space of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, for instance, land reforms addressed ethnic problems. In Romania, the sweeping land reforms carried out after the war were intended to prevent the danger of a Bolshevik revolution. Even in Soviet Russia, the initial years of the socialist state were characterized by a widespread movement toward the consolidation of peasant farming, and it took the peasant friendly policies of the New Economic Policy to stabilize the food supply. Everywhere, even in the USSR, these policies resulted from a previous *agrarianist consensus*.²

Agrarianism, as an ideology and an economic ideal, still awaits a comprehensive definition, but we can list at least some convictions shared by different agrarian movements. Agrarians emphasized the difference between agriculture and industry, focusing on economies of scale in industry that were impossible in agriculture. Rural production remained geographically dispersed across different ecological niches and dependent on natural cycles, and therefore dependent on human and animal labor. For this reason, they believed that agriculture would be spared the painful processes of industrial concentration, and farmers would resent social conflicts less acutely than the city dwellers, thanks to the different relationships between capital and labor in family farms.³

The early historiography on agrarianism focused in particular on a conservative strain, often reducing agrarianism to the interests of large landowners working against the forces of industrial capital and socialist proletarians. More recently, historians have stressed the importance of

agrarian parties for the consolidation of democratic regimes in Central Europe. In fact, agrarianism crossed political boundaries and took different forms. Even those within the socialist movement debated the role of peasant farms, with the German social-democrat Eduard David arguing that the adherence of agriculture to “natural” cycles rather than machine-made linearity would spare peasant farmers the concentration of the means of production that occurred in the industrial sector. From the vantage point of the development of agriculture after 1945, this might seem surprising. “It is remarkable,” the Belgian historian Jan Craeybecx noted, “that the majority of contemporaries believed in the economic viability of small and even very small farms. They defended above all the small peasant farmer (*boerenbezit*).” For many contemporaries, though, the defense of peasant farming was part of a rational economic strategy.⁴

European agrarian movements originated at the end of the nineteenth century when agricultural elites faced pressure from several sources: from the outside, the inflow of cheap grains from the Americas and Russia threatened their economic strength; from the inside, industrial elites and the rise of socialism in the countryside undermined their influence and power. Since the 1890s, a key element of the response to these challenges became *internal colonization*. In 1893, the German economist Max Sering laid the groundwork for this development in his influential book, *Internal Colonisation in the East-Elbian Provinces*. Sering argued that since North Americans had colonized the vast plains of the United States and Canada and brought those areas under the plow, the only chance for Europeans to remain competitive was intensification. Denser peasant populations in the countryside would lift demographic pressure on cities, while family farms would produce more efficiently than extensively farmed estates. Sering’s work shows that agrarian policies were not simply determined by social and political concerns. In the eyes of contemporary economists, they seemed to have an important economic rationale as well.⁵

Sering was an influential figure during his long life. After the collapse of imperial Germany in 1918, the social-democrats (Eduard David, in particular) asked Sering to draft a plan for internal colonization on the land of the Prussian aristocracy (which became the *Reichsiedlungsgesetz* of 1919). In 1921, he established in Berlin the Institute for Agricultural Economics, which studied the progress of internal colonization and agrarian reforms in Europe and North America; and in the course of the 1920s he was instrumental in the creation of the International Association of Agricul-

tural Economists, which met in different locations across Europe and the United States. In the wake of World War I, Sering's proposals for internal colonization were adapted to different national contexts, where they became peculiar prescriptions for modernity. His modern world would be centered on peasants, would accommodate villages and rural communities, and would be carefully tailored to local necessities. This was to be a slow, rather than a fast modernity.⁶

The Italian debate of 1922 reflected the concerns of postwar society and a shift in agrarian ideology since the 1890s. The growing national interest in peasant family farms (*piccola proprietà coltivatrice*) reveals two primary changes in Italian agrarianism. First, the Italian breed of agrarianism was not a romanticizing aesthetic. It was based instead on empirically founded sociological and economic arguments. In a series of detailed local investigations, agricultural economists sought to rearticulate a vision of agrarianism by answering a number of important questions. Could smallholdings improve production systems and increase the overall output? Should the government favor the creation of smallholdings? How could the state protect smallholdings from their tendency to fragment? Rather than relying on national economic macro-data to answer these questions, agrarian economists relied instead on micro-data on the inputs and outputs of farms—collected in the form of farm surveys—to produce a coherent set of scientifically justified prescriptions. This study, then, explores the “micro-foundations” of modern Italian agrarianism.⁷

Second, agrarianism was a comprehensive way of thinking that was shared by those with different political approaches. In the context of turn-of-the-century economic growth, agricultural economists expected the combined forces of the market, migration, extension services, and producers' cooperatives to effect the modernization of the countryside, which in turn would benefit a substantial share of the farmer population. This optimism disappeared as the second decade of the century unfolded. The war crisis and the specter of the socialist revolution made the question of the peasantry more pressing than ever. In a country where the majority of the labor force worked in agriculture in the immediate postwar years, and where the constituency of the Socialist Party was essentially agrarian, the question of peasant farms was crucial for postwar stabilization. In opposition to the intransigent defense of property rights by conservative parties, and to the nationalization of land urged by communists and socialists, politicians from the center and the moderate left proposed a form of inclusive

agrarianism that I call *democratic agrarianism*. They were willing to increase the number of owner-farmers in the name of the “social utility” of land.

After the failure of democratic agrarians to deliver, the issues of peasants and land remained crucial for the fascist regime, which tentatively took a middle way between the proposals of the center and those of the agrarian right. Under a technocratic leadership, the regime tried to reconcile the contrast between social issues and productivity of land. It declared peasant farmers a protected category of subjects and put the development of Italian agriculture under the tutelage of the state and its bureaucratic structure. I call this middle way *productivist agrarianism*. The economists’ analysis, which is reconstructed here, focused on peasant farms and their advantages and pathologies (a kind of medical metaphor well known to students of modernizing experts). Knowledge of peasants and the dangers they faced legitimized agricultural economists to lead the transformation of Italian agriculture.⁸

What, then, was the meaning of the policies proposed by agricultural economists in the course of the 1920s and 1930s? The defense of peasant farms was not, as Italian historians have often argued in the past, the result of an idealization of the past against the ironclad progress of industrial modernity. Nevertheless, the discourse of agrarian economists cannot be reduced to its technocratic and high-modernist aspects. They refused a future dominated by giant modernist factories and socialized monopolies. They favored a vision of modernity where the spread of electricity, cooperatives, and some forms of state intervention would salvage peasant life in the twentieth century. Their discourse, therefore, has to be recognized as a particular type of modernizing agrarianism that remained significant in Italy (and elsewhere in Europe) even after World War II.⁹

The introduction of universal male suffrage in 1912 and proportional representation in 1919 deeply transformed the political landscape in Italy. In the decade before 1914, the country had been ruled by a moderately progressive coalition under the leadership of Giovanni Giolitti, who governed with the support of center and left-wing liberals, along with the occasional votes of the left (radical and reformist socialists) or the right (nationalists). The first elections after the war, though, saw the dramatic advance of the Socialist Party and of the Catholic People’s Party (PPI), while the country experienced an unprecedented wave of riots and social unrest during the so-called “red biennium.”

By the spring of 1921, though, what the historian Charles S. Maier named the “post-war working class offensive” was essentially over. But the Parliament that resulted from the 1921 elections was at the same time extremely polarized and fragmented. Although many parties entered Parliament, we can identify four main groups: the Catholics and the Socialists, with around 20 percent of the votes each, the right-wing (fascists and nationalists), and a loose coalition of the forces that had dominated Italian politics before the war, such as Giolitti’s liberals.¹⁰

The People’s Party had a crucial role in the Chamber of Deputies, given that no majority could exist without it. Much of its constituency consisted of rural smallholders, sharecroppers, and small tenants, and the Party relied on a network of unions and cooperatives that rivaled those of the socialists. For this reason, the party was assigned the Ministry of Agriculture in the short-lived governments of the postwar period, with Giuseppe Micheli (May 1920–July 1921), Angelo Mauri (July 1921–February 1922), and Giovanni Bertini (February–October 1922) heading the post in rapid succession.

Bill 742 was the product of the effort of the People’s Party to appease its peasant constituency. More generally, in the unstable political situation of the early 1920s, the parties of the center and the moderate left tried to turn internal colonization into the instrument of a renewed national unity. The speaker of the People’s Party, Callisto Giavazzi, wishfully praised the large consensus on the law, which, according to him, spread beyond the Chamber of Deputies across the country itself to include the *Federconsorzi*, a powerful coalition of modernizing agriculturalists. The *Federconsorzi* and its leader, the former minister Giovanni Raineri, had been influential supporters of the progressive pre-war coalitions under Giovanni Giolitti’s left-wing liberals, and Giavazzi probably counted on the coalition to continue backing moderate progressive policies. But Giavazzi was also confident in the spontaneous evolution of the economic situation. The spread of peasant properties, he claimed, was already underway. The ownership of thousands of hectares had passed into the hands of peasants and the law would simply speed up the process.¹¹

The speakers of all parties appeared to support the bill during the month-long debate that followed its presentation to Parliament. They paid customary tribute to the Italian peasantry, declared that they shared the aims of the law, and affirmed the “social duties” of landowners. Many MPs confirmed again their conviction that the land had a “social, but not social-

ist” nature, and “the owner’s right to land depends on the owners’ ability to make it productive,” as the southern Giolittian liberal Raffaele Cotugno put it. Beyond the surface, though, the speeches revealed deep disagreements on the substance of the law. Both on the left and the right of the People’s Party, MPs expressed dissent. The right-wing parties claimed that the main goal should be to increase production, not to experiment with land redistribution and violate property rights. The Socialists, on the other hand, declared that the law did not do enough to reinforce the legal status of land occupations and workers’ cooperatives. The law’s supporters—the majority of the Popolari and some of the Giolittian liberals, especially those from the South—insisted that the law would increase production *and* enhance the living conditions of peasants. They believed the state could arbitrate a transition from an exclusive to an inclusive class system by guiding a relatively limited transfer of land from absentee landowners to toiling peasants. In the end, the Chamber of Deputies almost unanimously approved the bill, only for the Senate to reject it in the wake of the fascist takeover. The *Marcia su Roma* signaled that the agrarian elites had adopted violent repression to stabilize postwar society.¹²

The significance of the Popolari’s attempted 1922 transformation should not be overlooked because of this failure. The proposal represented the culmination of the democratic agrarianism that had dominated political discourse during the pre-war years and seemed to have gained more urgency with the war. But, in different forms and with different undertones, agrarian ideas continued to shape the discourse on agricultural policy under fascist rule and until the land reform of the 1950s. The main tenet shared by almost all participants in the debate (except the Socialists) was the idea that a healthy peasantry could increase production and stabilize society. Empirical research seemed to confirm this idea.

Already before the war, agricultural experts had contrasted the high productivity of peasant farms with the low land productivity of the latifundia of central and southern Italy. As early as 1906, the left-wing liberal minister Edoardo Pantano launched a plan for the internal colonization of the South to solve rural unemployment in Northeast Italy. Different organizations of the left—the Società Umanitaria di Milano and the League of Cooperatives—were involved in this plan, with meager results due to the lack of adequate funding and the intrinsic complexity of the enterprise. Ilario Zannoni, the agricultural economist who advised the Società Umanitaria on this project, cautioned that labor could not completely substitute

for capital. Zannoni estimated about 1.5 million hectares of land suitable for internal colonization, and much of it would require large-scale marsh reclamation. Such huge investments were unlikely to be entirely financed by private money.¹³

The war, though, made issues of rural poverty and landlessness more urgent. In 1917, the Federconsorzi's Giovanni Raineri, who was then the Minister of Agriculture, summoned a special committee of parliamentarians and officials to investigate the impact of the war on smallholdings. The assumption was that the war must have affected smallholdings negatively, and participants expressed their concern that the war might lead to the disappearance of smallholdings altogether. Politicians hoped, instead, that peasant farmers would be the backbone of an inclusive state, which could mediate between socialist landless workers and reactionary landowners, as in France. The ministry, therefore, prepared a questionnaire that was sent to the directors of the agricultural extension offices in February 1918.¹⁴

The extension offices—the so-called *cattedre ambulanti*—were directed by graduates in agricultural sciences and agricultural economics who lectured peasants on modern farming techniques and advised them on farm management. Due to their direct contact with peasants, extension offices were a much-praised source of information for the Italian government. The questionnaire included three key questions: had the number of smallholdings increased or shrunk during the war? What was happening with land prices? And what did the respondents expect would happen to prices after the war? The answers, which continued to arrive at the ministry throughout 1918 and 1919, were not unanimous, but they generally documented the rapid formation of new smallholdings in Northern Italy. As stated in the committee's summary report: "Properties are far from being concentrated in a few hands. Instead, they have been broken up into smaller parts, and in most provinces smallholdings have therefore increased, beginning with those [provinces] where agriculture is most developed."¹⁵

The extension offices also reported that the prices of land were soaring in almost all provinces. Nevertheless, the offices' directors were not unanimous in their expectations about future land prices. In Turin, the director of the local office expected prices to drop when war inflation came to an end (a surprisingly accurate prediction of what actually happened with the deflationary policies of the late 1920s). The majority of directors, however, forecasted that the demand for land would remain steady and prices would skyrocket (which is what happened in the first years after the war). "In

general,” they argued,

the prices of land have grown significantly, due to the wider availability of money [following an increased circulation of money], to the increased value of agricultural products, to the lively demands on the part of farming peasants, etc. This increase, in the period when the data were collected, had in certain areas reached double the pre-war prices, and it seems that it will keep on going.¹⁶

The directors of the extension offices attributed the increasing land prices to a deeply held aspiration among the peasantry to own land. One response is particularly illuminating. To a question about promoting peasant farms, the director of the Novara extension office answered that the creation of peasant farms was “a duty of the government toward those who, by shedding their blood for their Fatherland, acquired the right to see their living conditions improve.” The promotion of smallholdings, he continued, “combined wonderfully the fulfilment of a sacred duty, with the highest interests of the country.” Small properties, in fact, “ensur[ed] *the highest yield per hectare*.” The owner of a small plot,

has not at his disposal the effective means that big agriculturalists can command in order to cultivate the land economically, fertilize it conveniently, and sell the products. It cannot be denied, however, that not an inch of land gets lost, not a scrap of harvest is neglected, and all the works are completed on time and in the best possible way, so that, notwithstanding the above-mentioned flaws, the net return per hectare appears significantly higher in small properties than in large ones.

To these economic arguments, this agricultural economist also added a political one: “the peasant who becomes the owner of something (land, livestock, a house, etc.) has feelings of order and industriousness induced in him and wants to increase its savings in order to accrue his wealth.” The spreading of property was considered a safeguard of the democratic order.¹⁷

Raineri’s successor, Giuseppe Micheli of the People’s Party, summoned a new committee of experts in 1920. This time, the discussion moved to the means of preserving and expanding the number of small properties, since at that time, Micheli was preparing the first of the series of bills on internal colonization and against latifundia that resulted in the bill of 1922. The minister stated that “it [was] necessary to ease this ‘hunger for land’ wherever the technical conditions of the soil and of the crops allowed small farms to thrive, since an intimate link between the peasant and his land

contributes to peace and order in society and, at the same time, promotes a broader development of agricultural production, in particular if individual efforts are supported by cooperation.” Micheli, Raineri, and a number of those who had linked the Italian intervention in the Great War with an expansion of democratic rights, such as Gaetano Salvemini, agreed that peasant farms were socially and economically beneficial for the country. Their proposals against latifundia and in favor of smallholders were intended to extend democratic participation, reinforce constitutional order, and increase production at the same time.¹⁸

Apparently, all parties but the socialists and the communists put the issues of smallholdings, and therefore the question of the behavior of peasants on the land market, at the core of the state’s concerns. In fact, as in the case of Zannoni, the opinions of the experts justified both the apparent consensus and the hidden dissent. They acknowledged the potential role of peasant farms in fostering intensification and their resilience to economic crises. But experience also showed that peasants faced significant risks. In 1921, Micheli asked the most prominent agricultural economists to assess the viability of policies in favor of smallholdings, and to evaluate the different proposals then under discussion. The long and detailed reports presented by two influential professors of agricultural economics with close links with the Federconsorzi, Oreste Bordiga and Arrigo Serpieri, aimed at understanding the technical limitations that natural and economic conditions imposed on the expansion of smallholdings. The two economists wanted to establish their science as mediator between the opposing claims of politicians.

Bordiga and Serpieri recognized the value of peasant ownership, but they also anticipated (or echoed) many of the arguments of the agrarian elite against the bill of 1922. Serpieri, in particular, tried to identify an “area of economic convenience” for smallholdings and to understand how and where they could be socially advantageous. Unlike the optimism of democratic agrarians like Micheli, Serpieri’s comments on the proposal and then on bill 742 paid attention to the specificities of different areas. By questioning projects of land redistribution, the economist reaffirmed the principle that the only appropriate path to landownership was through hard labor and entrepreneurship, not legal shortcuts. Land redistribution would threaten productivity if not assisted by huge state investment.¹⁹

The widespread consensus for internal colonization had to do with agriculture, demography, and Italy’s balance of trade. Italian agricultural experts

were aware of effective extensive methods of cultivation, like the dry farming systems of North and South America. Nevertheless, they considered intensive farming the best solution for the agricultural problems of large parts of the peninsula. This conviction was based on an analysis of prices and returns on investment. The key indicator was the ratio between the rent and the price of land (Rv/V). The “rent” was a fictional value, computed by subtracting from the farm’s gross product all the farmer’s expenses, including labor, interests, the amortization of capital, and the farmer’s own work. Agricultural economists interpreted this residual value as the remuneration of the land input. The ratio, therefore, expressed the rate of return for investing in land.²⁰

A low rate of return paradoxically corresponded to a healthy agriculture. Under normal conditions, investments would flow into agriculture and increase land prices until the return on land would equate to the return on equally safe assets (and land was considered a very safe asset). Where capital was tight and land abundant, as in extensive systems, the capital value of land was relatively low and returns unnaturally high. In the early twentieth century, this principle translated into a consistent geography of Italian agriculture and a hierarchy of agricultural backwardness. As the rural sociologist Francesco Coletti noted in 1900: “Where capital is more abundant and the land has a more attractive appearance because of the improvements it underwent and of the increase in productivity that it bore . . . there plots find a broader demand and the return rate is lower.” In general, the high return rates reflected the backwardness of southern agriculture, but very high return rates could also be found in other areas of Italy, such as in the Tuscan Maremma (where it topped 6 percent against the 2.5 or 4 percent recorded in the rest of Tuscany). On the other hand, very low returns were reported for the small plots of Campania around Naples (3.5 to 4 percent)—the so-called *Campania Felix*—an area famous for its fertility. In Campania Felix very small plots gave extremely high yields thanks to the natural fertility of the land and to an immense amount of peasant labor. It is easy to see that a healthy agriculture was synonymous with high intensity farming, with a high input of labor and capital in order to *improve* agriculture.²¹

For a given Rv , though, low returns meant high land prices. As Achille Loria had already noticed at the end of the nineteenth century, peasants showed a tendency to pay higher prices than other investors. Although Ghino Valenti demonstrated the inconsistencies of Loria’s contention in

1901, the behavior of returning migrants in the early years of the new century confirmed the peasants' willingness to pay more. Why did peasants buy expensive land instead of investing their small capital otherwise, then? Agricultural economists answered by characterizing the peasantry in specific ways.²²

Peasant psychology became a subject of serious study for economists and sociologists in the early decades of the twentieth century. The French conservative reformer Frederic Le Play and his pupil Emile Cheysson were pioneers in the scientific study of the European peasantry. The two Frenchmen believed in the necessity of preserving the traditional peasantry as a healthy way of life, because, they argued, its traditional relationships protected it from pernicious class struggle. Their methodology, based on the study of family and farm budgets, translated peasant life into a neatly drawn balance sheet, accounting for the family's sources of revenue and expenses. Their methods—and to a lesser extent their political ideas—were extremely influential in shaping the research of Italian sociologists and economists.²³

Rational explanations of peasant behavior, such as those of the extension office of Novara, suggested peasants worked more effectively than wage-workers, and they exploited the land at their disposal in more ingenious ways than capitalist farmers did. Peasants would cultivate more effectively because secure ownership would give them the right incentives to improve the land from generation to generation. It made perfect sense for them to pay a bit more for land than capitalist entrepreneurs.²⁴

The optimism of Novara's extension workers was supported by data on the expenses and revenues of Swiss farms collected by the famous economist Ernst Laur in the early twentieth century. As the secretary of the Union of Swiss Peasants (*Schweizerischer Bauernverband*), Laur became a reference point for all European agrarians, with economists from all over the world visiting the accounting office that he created in Brugg. His analysis of the balance sheets of thousands of Swiss farms demonstrated that agriculture was not involved in the movement toward capitalist concentration that had occurred in industry. He argued that if they had access to markets, peasant farms were a viable economic model, rather than a simple, primitive form of agriculture. During the economic boom of the 1900s, Serpieri also saw Italian agriculture as destined to develop with the demise of absentee landowners and the involvement of peasants in the market structure. "Dragged in by the mechanisms of a trade economy," Serpieri

claimed, "peasant farmers would become entrepreneurs." The failure of the democratic agrarianism of the People's Party in 1922, in fact, did not stop the study of small farms, but gave it a different meaning.²⁵

By 1922, after shifting political allegiances from left to right, and serving as advisor in a number of organizations such as the Società Umanitaria and Federconsorzi, Serpieri sided with fascism and was appointed Undersecretary for Agriculture in Mussolini's first cabinet. Serpieri's postwar studies had led him to refine his understanding of the entrepreneurial nature of peasants, adding a new dimension to the understanding of peasant psychology. Serpieri interpreted the fact that peasants paid too much for their land as a sign of the distance between the *homo oeconomicus* of theory and real peasants, who were not irrational but had aims other than profit. Research on the extra-economic motives affecting peasant investment in land became a distinguishing trait of Serpieri's school.

Central to his discourse was the distinction between capitalist farms employing hired labor, and peasant farms primarily employing family labor. The agricultural classes appeared divided between capitalist farmers, peasant entrepreneurs (sharecroppers, small tenants, smallholders), and day laborers. The latter, according to Serpieri, did not really belong to the agricultural world. By means of his threefold scheme, the agricultural economist meant to neutralize a socialist interpretation of society centered on the two warring classes of owners and laborers, a fight that would lead, over time, to collective farms. According to Serpieri's interpretation, capitalists and day laborers were mobile and could abandon the land. They would actually do so given the right conditions, he argued, because they did not possess a real peasant psychology.²⁶

The fact that large farms had a high ratio between the return on land and its price was taken as a sign that capitalist investors considered agriculture a business like any other. They were impatient. "Smallholders, small tenants, sharecroppers and other intermediate and similar categories" instead stuck to the land and agricultural life "with all their interests, and all their hearts." The asymmetric pressure on the price of land was the sign of the attachment of peasants to the land. Peasants prized the security of working their own land over all other forms of investment; as shown in the surveys between the late 1910s and late 1920s, they wanted to be self-sufficient entrepreneurs, even when land was relatively expensive.²⁷

Serpieri invoked Vilfredo Pareto's conservative sociology to explain the differentials in returns. As a student, Serpieri adhered to the marginalist

economics of Maffeo Pantaleoni and Pareto. He eventually adopted the latter's concepts of non-logical action and persistence of the aggregates in order to explain why peasants did not behave as *homines oeconomici*. "Agriculture is not simply an economic activity next to industry and commerce: it is a way of life," Serpieri claimed in 1924. In the "world of business, of capitalism, of industrialism," the men who had the qualities for speculation, "the instincts of combinations, as Pareto called them," prevailed. Agriculture was different; it was not "the world of fast and rewarding gains, of quick innovations and combinations." The countryside begot different qualities, and agriculturalists were "less sharp, less ingenious, less cunning, but stronger in temperament and more honest." They displayed the tendency that Pareto called "persistence of aggregates": they felt "in the highest degree the feeling that bound them to things and people, such as the bond to the family, to property, to their own land, to their native country, to their own language, and religion. . . . Such feelings have often the same or even more strength than profit."²⁸

In this double praise of the peasantry, we see not only the standard nationalist rhetoric of agrarianism, but also the continuity between the young Serpieri who in 1908 praised the capitalist dynamics that had invested in the Italian countryside, and the mature supporter of a fascist corporatist economy. The key element of continuity was, almost paradoxically, the idea of entrepreneurship. Serpieri, obviously, did not deny the modernizing influence of large capitalist tenants, but he recognized the importance of entrepreneurship as a life choice, even when it meant resistance to "modern agriculture." Independent farmers (*contadino proprietario*) were supposedly capable of miracles in raising the productivity of the land:

In order to understand the effects that could follow from the prevalence of the industrial spirit in agriculture, the reader may simply reflect that if it is true—and it is true—that most of the work of expanding fertile land is due, not to economic calculations, but to love for the land and property, the greater part of the Italian countryside would be at a much lower level of productivity than it is at present.

Peasant and industrial farms should coexist, in mutually beneficial ways. Peasants increased agricultural production by expanding agriculture on marginal land unsuitable for "industrial farming" but not necessarily unproductive.²⁹

Serpieri was concerned with the financial fragility of peasant farms, but he also believed they could contribute to the social and economic regen-

eration of the Italian countryside. National economic interests, he argued, did not always coincide with the economic interests of individuals: "Just as the man of the fields invests his savings in his own land, driven more by love for the land, than by expectations of gain, so the Italian collective must act. Savings tied up in soil give a high social return, even when the economic return is low." Consequently, Serpieri heralded a sort of agricultural, rather than industrial, option for the national economy in the early 1920s, a conception that resonated with the fascist regime. Fascist rhetoric built extensively on the figure of these peasants, the *rurali*, who had motives different from the mere pursuit of profit.³⁰

This conception led to the controversial 1924 and 1933 laws (*legge Serpieri* and *testo unico sulla bonifica integrale*) on total land reclamation that Serpieri drafted as Undersecretary for Agriculture. Intensifying agriculture on formerly marginal land (marshes, for instance) extended the stock of available land and made land ownership a real possibility for at least some peasants, provided they could invest sufficient labor. It recognized the desire of peasants for land, while it declared that wageworkers—until then the heart of socialist resistance in the countryside—did not really belong to the countryside. Moreover, for a country with little private capital and a huge reservoir of labor, a model of labor-intensive soil transformation seemed particularly promising.³¹

The very qualities attributed to the peasantry—its resistance to innovation, its hard work, its bond with the land, its lack of "industrial spirit"—could also degenerate into dangerous social "pathologies," which Serpieri identified as the negative dynamics of peasant farms. Peasants bought plots of land for very high prices but were then unable to repay their debts or were overburdened with work. The law imposed the division of properties among the heirs, thus pushing independent peasants back into the rural proletariat. Moreover, even if peasants could subsist by their work on their own land, they rarely possessed enough capital for machines, fertilizers, storage and transportation facilities, and large-scale land improvements. Consequently, the "pathologies" of peasant farms threatened to offset the social value of small properties.

The 1920s witnessed repeated crises of agriculture. The high prices of the late war years dropped very soon afterwards. It is unclear how this affected the terms of trade between agriculture and industry, although the International Institute of Agriculture argued that they worsened substantially over the entire decade. Contemporary observers were unanimous in

decrying the difficult situation faced by farmers on national and international markets. Credit was the most frequently mentioned cause of problems, with the deflationist policies of the 1920s (Italy returned to the gold standard in 1926) contributing to the worsening of the economic climate.³²

The economic viability of small farming was thus called into question. When Serpieri established the National Institute of Agricultural Economics (INEA) to coordinate and centralize research in agricultural economics, one of the first initiatives of the institute was to launch a wide-ranging inquiry on small properties in 1929. The direction of the inquiry was entrusted to Giovanni Lorenzoni, while the inquiry itself was to be carried out by the local branches of INEA. Because of the links between INEA, universities, and extension offices, this meant the involvement of all the most prominent agricultural economists.

The most compelling question for agricultural economists concerned the economic and financial health of small farms established after the war. To answer these questions, Lorenzoni recommended investigators to choose farms representative of the different types of new smallholdings. Significantly, agricultural problems seemed to require data that only agricultural economists could collect. The aggregate macro-data of the Central Statistical Institute were useful but not detailed enough. Following a combination of Laur's and Cheysson's approaches, agricultural economists concentrated, instead, on farm surveys, which showed how income was distributed among labor, management, land, and other inputs. The effects of the tightening of credit or of the worsening terms of trade immediately reflected on the financial accounts of the farm. For methodological guidelines, Lorenzoni referred to Serpieri's *Guida a ricerche di economia agraria*, which became the standard textbook for farm surveys.³³

Farm surveys showed that the standard of living of the new farm owners had often improved, albeit slightly. In Tuscany, for instance, Mario Bandini reported that "their conditions seem[ed] not to be very bad" when their properties were big enough to allow them to subsist exclusively on farming. They tended their farms more carefully and obtained a higher net yield per hectare than larger estates did. But whatever was gained in terms of the peasant standard of living, Bandini remarked, was lost in the way the land was cultivated:

the small farmer tends to produce for his own consumption. The market does not attract him, and he prefers to grow corn rather than tobacco and as much wheat as he can; he is also strongly averse to purchases from outside

the farm, and reduces his use of fertilizers, machines, tools, pesticides, etc. Only manual labor is spent in abundance on the land.³⁴

The negative effects of the fragmentation of large estates, which were not visible in the increased production of the Tuscan peasants, were clear instead “from the point of view of agriculture as a whole”: “[peasants] do not fertilize, do not follow rational rotation and neglect industrial crops, lack clear concepts in the nourishment and selection of livestock.” The same had happened on the farms that Baron Leopoldo Franchetti bequeathed to his tenants near Città di Castello, in Umbria. In the first few years after the baron’s death, the new owners generally increased their production and consumption, but they also renounced the most modern techniques and deforested the former estate.³⁵

In Campania, Alessandro Brizi, who held the chair of agricultural economics in Portici and led the local branch of INEA, had similar observations but insisted on the difference between “parcel farmers” (*proprietari particellari*) and “autonomous farmers” (*proprietari autonomi*). Autonomous farmers had properties large and productive enough to allow them to live exclusively on the farm’s production. Parcel farmers, instead, had to integrate their income as farmers with other sources, working either in urban factories or, most commonly, on the farms of others. The conditions of parcel farmers were significantly worse than the conditions of autonomous farmers, but both categories had made a slight increase in net production (and therefore in household consumption) at the expense of the remuneration of their labor.³⁶

Surveys of peasant farms were complicated because neither wages nor rent were paid to workers or landowners. Brizi, therefore, had to disentangle their value from the farm’s total revenue. Theoretically, the revenue of the farm should pay the rent (Rv) and labor. This meant that by subtracting an appraised Rv (and the cost of other inputs) from the revenue of farms, Brizi could determine a nominal value of peasant labor (*reddito da lavoro*). The returns for the labor that peasant families dedicated to their land appeared to be extremely low. Brizi concluded that the prices of land were kept high by a relative depreciation of the labor input, since high prices of land translated into high values for the ordinary rent, and hence for the appraised rent of peasant farms. Peasants, in other words, were exploiting themselves.³⁷

With his data, Brizi confirmed that the purchase of small properties “tends only to a small extent to have the nature of a capitalist investment. It

is instead essentially a means of labor (*strumento di lavoro*).” Peasants were driven by “strong extra-economic motives.” Nevertheless, Brizi concluded that small autonomous farmers, “notwithstanding some well-known flaws on the technical and economic side, [had] steady and great advantages on the social side—wherefore its spread and preservation must be protected, especially in Italy, a country where the area of economic convenience of smallholdings is peculiarly broad.”³⁸

Recently, some historians have stressed the emergence of two contrasting groups of agricultural economists during the 1930s. One group aligned with Serpieri in defending a fundamental if limited role of markets in agricultural policies. The other followed Serpieri’s pupil, Giuseppe Tassinari, in asking for more decisive state intervention, which was in line with the increasingly interventionist nature of the fascist regime. But despite their divergent views on the practicalities of land reclamation—and their violent fights for influence and power—the two groups shared the conviction that peasant farms were important, and this paradigm passed along to their pupils, such as Giuseppe Medici and Mario Bandini. They wanted to demonstrate the benefits of small farms, while preventing peasant methods from negatively affecting agricultural productivity. The economists’ important contribution to the economic policy of the fascist regime was a response to this dilemma.³⁹

In 1933, Serpieri wrote:

Fascism considers that the preservation of a high degree of rurality is a matter of fundamental importance—at once moral, political and economic—for it ensures the growth of the population, the primary condition of power, it ensures the physical and moral sanity of the race, it encourages the virtues of industry and thrift . . . it directs production towards the supply of staple foods, and therefore ensures a greater degree of independence of the nation.”

Here, we see the overlap of the most diverse arguments in favor of “rurality” that appeared as the fascist *Ventennio* unfolded. They involved international trade and food self-sufficiency, concerns with savings and investments, and the issue of moral and physical health. The existence of smallholdings was key to the preservation of this “high degree of rurality.” In their proposals, Serpieri’s group accepted the basic assumption of the debate of the early 1920s, namely the social utility of land, but they tried to reconcile it with economic liberalism. For them, the corporatist state should directly “ease but not push” (*agevolare ma non forzare*) the process of creating peasant farms, thus preserving the natural process of selection of the best peasants

and preventing bottlenecks in the land market from undermining the process.⁴⁰

Some of the policies that were impossible in 1922 became a possibility as the decade unfolded. Fascist agricultural economists looked for solutions that, although similar in objectives, would see less sacrifice from landowners and more financial involvement of the state than the democratic agrarians of the 1910s–1920s would have desired. Lorenzoni stressed the continuity between the bill of 1922 and Serpieri's law of 1924, but noted the differences as well. Although the land reclamation law of 1924 threatened confiscation of unreclaimed land, this never happened. But more than in the details of the law, the real differences resided in the new social climate after the regime successfully stemmed inflation and eliminated the threat from daily workers.⁴¹

As experts on peasant ideals and farm pathologies, fascist agricultural economists fostered a development that would save at least some peasants from the fate of agricultural proletarians, would give ownership to some of the struggling sharecroppers and wagedworkers, and would freeze the rest of the countryside in the expectation that land reclamation and the colonies would provide more land. Serpieri vehemently rejected the idea that agriculture might become an industry like any other. He and his pupils envisioned instead a thriving peasantry—both as provider of food and as reservoir of labor—next to a mechanized agri-industrial sector dedicated to the production of crops such as hemp and sugar beets.

The two best-known initiatives of the 1920s and 1930s, the *bonifica integrale* (total land reclamation) and the *battaglia del grano* (the campaign for the increase of wheat production) reflected this mix of concerns. The former, in particular, carried on the logic of internal colonization. The bonifica acknowledged the principle of the social utility of land. It aimed at increasing the intensity of production in precisely those regions that, according to Niccoli's geography of agricultural production, were the most backward: the marshes of central and southern Italy. Together with the policies for the construction of peasant homesteads on Sicilian latifundia, the bonifica was the main effort to promote intensification by creating peasant family farms. Markets were not effective in fostering the progress of agriculture. "The machinery of private production," Serpieri argued, "works very imperfectly when left to its own resources." Government intervention did not aim at eliminating markets, but at making them more responsive to social needs.

State intervention grew enormously over the two fascist decades in the

forms of bureaucratic control, public investment, and new institutions. The government invested billions of lira in the bonifica. State funded laboratories and experimental stations developed and spread high-yield cultivars with the *battaglia del grano*. Agricultural experts increasingly acquired bureaucratic powers. Cooperatives were transformed into state-controlled institutions with police power. Contingencies and power struggles, within a framework dominated by politically well-connected landowners, certainly played a major role in determining these policies, but the little consistency they did have originated in the idea that the government should find the balance between contradictory economic forces. The government should spread intensive farms, while protecting them from their inner destructive tendencies. In order to do so and to prevent irrational bubbles in land prices, INEA established a service of accounting and appraisal on the model of the appraisal office that Laur had created alongside his accounting office, to guide peasants in their choice of investment. The consolidation of exceedingly small plots, by state intervention on the model of Austria and Germany, was envisaged to fight against land fragmentation. Moreover, economists demanded a new inheritance law that would preserve the integrity of farms, like the Swiss *Anerbrecht*. On the other hand, for peasant farms to be competitive, they should share at least to a certain degree in the advantages of industrial farming. Against the much-lamented deterioration of terms of trade between agriculture and industry, therefore, agricultural economists invoked the expansion of cooperatives for the purchase of inputs and the transformation of outputs.⁴²

This program was not, as some have argued, “an ideology of backwardness” or a “form of resistance” against modernization by Serpieri and the other agricultural economists. It was instead a consistent vision of agriculture that envisioned a modernization of peasant farms along lines of social and economic desirability. Cesare Longobardi, a collaborator of Serpieri, thus described the future:

We can foresee that a new type of family business, partly agricultural and partly industrial, will arise which will form a connecting link between the farm and the factory, a new social cell combining the functions of family life with those of production. Such concerns conserve the individuality of the worker, they utilize all the labor power of the family, take full advantage of the adaptability of electric power, and ensure that due care is taken of the savings invested in equipment.⁴³

This vision explains, at least in part, something that has puzzled his-

torians, namely the seemingly contradictory nature of fascist agricultural policies: technocratic tendencies and a scientifically legitimized discourse of modernization coupled with a localistic and anti-industrialist rhetoric. Statist ideals, cartelization, and monopolies coexisted with a strong defense of economic liberalism and competition. The productivist agrarianism of the 1930s attempted a conservative modernization, where technical assistance played a major role in the preservation, rather than the overcoming, of private ownership. This paradigm preceded and outlived the fascist regime, and framed the debate of the 1940s and 1950s. The land reform of 1950, for instance, not only created large numbers of smallholdings, but it also included land consolidation, probably the most controversial suggestion of the agricultural experts. The goal of the land reform was to increase the intensity of land use, thus achieving gains in net production and a better distributed social welfare.⁴⁴

Both the democratic agrarianism of the Giolittian era and the productivist agrarianism of the fascist agricultural economists rested on empirical, scientific observations. Agrarianism was an economic theory, with ideological and aesthetic ramifications, and a set of solutions to the crisis of European agriculture that began in the 1870s. These solutions could differ and have reactionary or progressive connotations, but they all began with the recognition that peasant farming and peasant families were to remain at the core of agricultural modernization. Data from family budgets, farm surveys, and accounting inquiries were mobilized to explain and interpret the behavior of peasants in economic, sociological, and even psychological terms. As bearers of a diagnosis for the pathologies of farming life, agricultural economists purported to lead the balanced modernization of Italian agriculture.⁴⁵

NOTES

1. On the bill, see, Luigi Sturzo and Giovanni Bertini, eds., *La legge sul latifondo per la colonizzazione agraria: rievocazioni e notizie documentate* (Pistoia: 1949). Among the many publications dedicated to the fascist seizure of power available in English, see, Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929* (2nd ed., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); and Anthony L. Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites and Italian Fascism: The Province of Bologna, 1901–1926* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

2. Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Giuseppe Giovanni Lorenzoni proposed a classification of land reforms according to their aim in Giovanni Lorenzoni, *La questione agraria Albanese: studi, inchieste e proposte per una riforma agraria in Albania* (Bari: G. Laterza, 1930). For a survey of the literature on Central

European cases, see Derek Howard Aldcroft, *Europe's Third World: The European Periphery in the Interwar Years* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006). Internal colonization was one of the most characteristic projects of the interwar period. The period between 1918 and 1945 saw a spurt in such projects; for the case of Spain, see, Javier Monclus and José L. Oyon, *Políticas y técnicas en la ordenación del espacio rural* (Madrid: I.E.A.L., 1988); for a Europe-wide survey of internal colonizations, see, Jan G. Smit, "Laendliche Neusiedlung in Mitteleuropa vom Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Gegenwart als nationalpolitisches Instrument: Ziele, zeitgenössische Stellungnahmen und Ergebnisse," *Erdkunde* 40, 3 (1986), especially 170. For an instance of the persisting importance of rural villages, see, Katja Brusch, *Als das Dorf noch Zukunft war: Agrarismus und Expertise zwischen Zarenreich und Sowjetunion*, 1. Aufl. (Köln: Böhlau Köln, 2014).

3. On the importance of this kind of biological metaphor for agricultural economists of the early twentieth century, see, Joosep Nou, "Studies in the Development of Agricultural Economics in Europe," *Lantbruksbögskolans annaler* 33 (1967).

4. For a recent collection of essays dedicated to agrarianism in Europe, see, Helga Schultz and Angela Harre, eds., *Bauerngesellschaften auf dem Weg in die Moderne: Agrarismus in Ostmitteleuropa 1880 bis 1960* (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010); Schulz and Harre build upon the classics, Heinz Gollwitzer, *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Fischer, 1977), and Karl Bergmann, *Agrarromantik und Grossstadtfeindschaft* (A. Hain, 1970). For the case of Laur in Switzerland, see, Werner Baumann and Peter Moser, *Bauern im Industriestaat: Agrarpolitische Konzeptionen und bäuerliche Bewegungen in der Schweiz 1918–1968* (Orell Füssli, 1999); Werner Baumann, *Bauernstand und Bürgerblock: Ernst Laur und der Schweizerische Bauernverband, 1897–1918* (Zürich: Orell Fuessli Verlag, 1993). The United States also had its version of agrarianism; see, Jess Gilbert and S. M. Brown, "Alternative Land Reform Proposals in the 1930s: The Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union," *Agricultural History* 55 (Oct. 1981): 351–69. Eduard David, "Oekonomische Verschiedenheiten zwischen Landwirtschaft und Industrie," *Die neue Zeit Revue des geistigen und öffentlichen Lebens* 41, 2, 41 (1895). Eduard David was a legal social-democrat and a follower of Bernstein. Jan Craeybeckx, "De agrarische depressie van het einde der XIXe eeuw en de politieke strijd om de boeren," *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* (1973): 191–230, 203.

5. Max Sering, *Die innere Kolonisation im östlichen Deutschland* (Duncker & Humblot, 1893); on Sering and the meaning of the American experience, see, Robert L. Nelson, "From Manitoba to the Memel: Max Sering, inner colonization and the German East," *Social History* 35, 4 (2010); Giovanni Lorenzoni, "Max Sering," *Giornale degli Economisti e Annali di Economia*, Luglio–Ottobre (1940) documents the relationship between the Italians and Max Sering. On the importance of fieldwork for the definition of the agrarian question and internal colonization, see, Raluca Mușat, "Working the Field: Rural Experts and the Agrarian Question' in the Romanian Principalities 1864–1914," in *Perpetual Motion? Transformation and Transition in Central and Eastern Europe & Russia*, eds. Bhambray et al., Studies in Russia and Eastern Europe No. 8 (London: SSEES, 2011), 30–43.

6. The Institut was a separate foundation (*Stiftung*) funded by the German and Prussian ministries of agriculture. See Irene Stoehr, "Von Max Sering zu Konrad Meyer—ein machtergreifender Generationenwechsel in der Agrar—und Siedlungswissenschaft," in *Autarkie und Ostexpansion: Pflanzenzucht und Agrarforschung im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Susanne Heim (Göttingen: 2002), 60–62.

7. The choice of sources (reports, fieldwork manuals, and public interventions of agricultural economists) obviously induces a very particular perspective on the whole issue of agrarianism and agricultural modernization; in a way, this is an "exploration in historical

political economy” of the kind suggested by Charles S. Maier, “Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity in the 1920s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, 2 (1970); and Alfredo Salsano, *Ingegneri e Politici: Dalla Razionalizzazione alla “Rivoluzione Manageriale”* (Torino: Einaudi, 1987). On the peculiar way of generalizing from micro to macro, see, Federico D’Onofrio, “Making Variety Simple: Agricultural Economists in Southern Italy, 1907–1909,” *History of Political Economy* 44, 5 (2012): 93–113.

8. On the metaphor of the medical gaze, see, Raluca Mușat, “Sociologists and the Transformation of the Peasantry in Romania, 1925–1940” (PhD diss., SSEES, University College London, 2011), 248. The persistence of this metaphor is demonstrated by Alessandro Brizi, “A proposito di patologia economia dell’impresa coltivatrice,” *Rivista di Economia Agraria* 3, 3 (1949).

9. For an example of past interpretations of the defense of peasant farms, see, Lea D’Antone, “La Modernizzazione dell’agricoltura Italiana negli anni Trenta,” *Studi Storici* 22, 3 (1981). The high-modernist side of Italian agricultural policies has been stressed over the years by Carl Ipsen, *Dictating Demography: The Problem of Population in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Tiago Saraiva, “Fascist Labscapes: Geneticists, Wheat, and the Landscapes of Fascism in Italy and Portugal,” *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 40 (Fall 2010); Tiago Saraiva and M. Norton Wise, “Autarky/Autarchy: Genetics, Food Production, and the Building of Fascism,” *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 40 (Fall 2010). For the concept of high-modernism, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). In 1930 there was a frank exchange of opinion between Serpieri and Ugo Spirito on this topic; see, Ugo Spirito, “Ruralizzazione o Industrializzazione?” *Archivio di studi corporativi* 1, 1 (1930); and Serpieri’s answer in the following issue of the journal. There is an interesting parallel between the modernizing element of European agrarianism and the populist movement in the United States, of which Charles Postel rewrote the history stressing how the movement, which has often been described in cultural terms, was indeed concerned with very concrete questions of economic progress and justice; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Lourenzo Fernández-Prieto, Juan Pan-Montojo, and Miguel Cabo, eds., *Agriculture in the Age of Fascism: Authoritarian Technocracy and Rural Modernization, 1922–1945* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 4–5.

10. Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, 192. Paolo Carusi, *I partiti politici Italiani dall’Unità ad oggi* (Roma: Studium, 2015).

11. Camera dei Deputati, *Atti del Parlamento del Regno d’Italia: Legislatura XXVI, Sessione 1, Tornata del May 4, 1922* (Rome, 1922), 3977.

12. Camera dei Deputati, *Atti del Parlamento del Regno d’Italia: Legislatura XXVI, Sessione 1, 2a Tornata del 23 June 23, 1922* (Rome, 1922), 6762. The fascist regime had obviously wiped away those proposals for laws that in the early 1920s aimed at the “socialization of the land” or the expropriation of absentee landowners. Arrigo Serpieri, *La guerra e le classi rurali Italiane* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930), recalls the socialist proposal presented on Dec. 17, 1921, by the Right Hon. Canevari and Piemonte: “in order to begin the process of socializing the land,” while the Catholic Partito Popolare supported the participation of farm workers in the profits (cointeressenza), 181–82; moreover the regime had stopped the “communist riots” that had forced “weak” landowners to sell: Giovanni Lorenzoni recalls “that peasants took advantage of panicking landowners under the threat or actual pressure of communist upheaval,” in *Introduzione e guida ad un’inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice postbellica in Italia* (Roma: Treves Dell’Ali, 1929), 3; Serpieri states that

those who sold their land under the threat of socialism were “weak,” and the whole process had been a sort of natural selection of the strongest landowners. It seems nevertheless that the breaking down of latifundia went on in Sicily; see, Giovanni Molè, *Studio-inchiesta sui latifondi Siciliani* (Roma: Tip. del Senato, 1929).

13. Ibid.; Ilario Zannoni, “La Colonizzazione interna,” *L'Italia Economica* 2 (1908): 50–56.

14. The committee met for the first time on Oct. 15, 1917. Among its members were Luigi Rava, vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies, Senator Count Eugenio Faina, the MPs Giovanni Pallastrelli as representative of the SAI, Francesco Beltrami as representative of the Association of Smallholders, and Massimo Samoggia, the president of the agricultural office of the Società Umanitaria. With them, there was also Giuseppe Micheli, future Minister of Agriculture. After the cabinet fell, the committee reconvened under the new minister, Giovanni Battista Miliani. Guiseppe Micheli, “Verbale della Terza Seduta del 16 marzo 1918, Ministero dell'Agricoltura—Direzione generale dell'agricoltura,” *Per la Piccola Proprietà Rurale e Montana*, vol. 1 (Roma: Tip. L. Cecchini, 1921–1922), 54.

15. See, D'Onofrio, “Making Variety Simple”; on the role of cattedre in Italian statistics, see, Federico D'Onofrio, “Les Statistiques Agricoles de l'Italie libérale et les porteurs d'intérêts (1907–1929),” in *Les Organisations Patronales et la Sphère Publique*, eds. Danielle Fra-boulet, Clotilde Druelle-Korn and Pierre Vernus (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013); and Federico D'Onofrio, *Observing Agriculture in Early 20th Century Italy* (London: Routledge, 2016). Pietro Vigorelli's summary of the reports in “Ministero dell'Agricoltura—Direzione generale dell'agricoltura,” vol. 1, 71.

16. The cattedra in Turin, for instance, in reply to the question about the average prices of land before and after the war, claimed an increase of 35 to 40 percent in the prices of plots in the plain, “due to the strong demand for land by smallholders, traders, and industrialists.” In Alessandria, the director reported an average rise to 3,500 lire per hectare from 2,200 lire before the war; in Novara, prices rose from 4,000–5,000 to 6,000–8,000 lire per hectare in the irrigated areas; Cremona declared a growth in prices of about 20 percent. See, “Ministero dell'Agricoltura—Direzione generale dell'agricoltura,” vol. 1, 73, 77.

17. Ibid., 100 (emphasis in original).

18. The new committee included Faina, Raineri, Pallastrelli (who was Micheli's vice-minister), Maggiorino Ferraris, Beltrami, Prof. Gaetano Mosca, Eugenio Azimonti, Antonino Bartoli of SAI, Bordiga, Enrico Fileni, (the president of the Association of Travelling Chairs of Agriculture), Ernesto Marengi, and Arrigo Serpieri, who was teaching at the time in the Istituto Superiore Forestale in Florence. For quote, see, “Ministero dell'Agricoltura—Direzione generale dell'agricoltura,” vol. 1, 2, 10. For the link between democratic interventionism and the polemic against latifundia, see, Giuseppe Galasso, *Passato e Presente del Meridionalismo*, 2 vols. (Napoli: Guida, 1978), 2, 28.

19. On Serpieri and the theory of the area of economic convenience, see, Lea D'Antone, “La Modernizzazione dell'agricoltura Italiana negli anni Trenta.”

20. On knowledge of American dry farming, see, Camera dei Deputati, *Atti del Parlamento del Regno d'Italia: Legislatura XXVI, Sessione 1, Tornata del May 5*, (Rome, 1922), 4070.

21. Francesco Coletti, *Economia rurale e politica rurale in Italia: Raccolta di studi* (Piacenza: Federazione Italiana dei Consorzi Agrari, 1926), 148. Coletti was at the time Secretary General of the moderate Società degli Agricoltori Italiani. Serpieri's teacher, Vittorio Niccoli, introduced a typology of farms according to the degree of intensity and to the Rv/r ratio that for a long time served as the rule of thumb land valuator. These ideas about the land market presupposed a number of conditions to be fulfilled that were typical of the Marshallian–Walrasian economics of the 1890s; see, Vittorio Niccoli, *Prontuario dell'agricoltore:*

Manuale di agricoltura, economia, estimo e costruzioni rurali, Seconda edizione riveduta ed ampliata (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli Edit, 1899). In an unconvincing paper, Giovanni Federico argues that the alleged backwardness of southern extensive agriculture does not show up in data on labor productivity and only partially in the TFP computed at regional levels for 1911; see, Giovanni Federico, "Ma l'agricoltura meridionale era davvero arretrata?" *Rivista di politica economica* 97, 3 and 4 (2007): 317–40. For a short history of the critical misfortune of latifundia and for a vindication of its economic meaning, see, Marta Petrusiewicz, *Latifondo: Economia morale e vita materiale in una periferia dell'Ottocento* (Venezia: Marsilio Ed, 1989).

22. Ghino Valenti, *La proprietà della terra e la costituzione economica: Saggi critici intorno al sistema di Achille Loria* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1901). The characterization of the peasantry as an exception was a common agrarian strategy elsewhere as well, and is still popular; see, Jan D. van der Ploeg, *Peasants and the Art of Farming: A Chayanovian Manifesto* (Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2013); and Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

23. Francesco Coletti, *La popolazione rurale in Italia e i suoi caratteri demografici, psicologici e sociali: Raccolta di studi* (Piacenza: Federazione Italiana dei Consorzi Agrari, 1925); Coletti, for instance, designed the 1906–1909 inquiry on the conditions of peasants in Southern Italy according to Cheysson's recommendations; see, D'Onofrio, "Making Variety Simple," 101. On Le Play in Italy, see, Maria R. Protasi, "Tra scienza e riforma sociale: Il pensiero e il metodo d'indagine sociale di F. Le Play e dei suoi continuatori in Italia (1857–1914)," *Studi Storici* 37, 3 (1996): 813–45.

24. Giovanni Lorenzoni, *Introduzione e guida*, 72.

25. The famous agricultural economist Aleksandr Chayanov visited Laur's office in 1912; see, Werner Baumann and Heiko Haumann, "... um die Organisation des typischen Arbeitsbetriebes kennenzulernen.' Zu Aleksandr Čajanovs Schrift, 'Bäuerliche Wirtschaft in der Schweiz,'" *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue Suisse d'histoire = Rivista storica Svizzera* 47 (1997); Chayanov recognized the methodological continuity between himself, Laur, and Le Play, in Aleksandr V. Čajanov and E. A. Tončů, *O budžetnikh issledovanjakh* (Moskva: Izdatel'skij Dom Tončů, 2006). Ernesto Marengi, Brizi, and De Polzer were among the Italians who visited Brugg. See, Alessandro Brizi and Alfredo DePolzer, *L'Ufficio di contabilità agraria e l'Ufficio di estimo rurale dall'Unione Svizzera dei contadini* (Roma: INEA, 1938). Peasant farms were threatening, especially for Marxist theory, and this explains the sarcasm Karl Kautsky directed against Sering. Eduard David tried to accommodate peasant farms within Marxism; see, Eduard David, "Oekonomische Verschiedenheiten zwischen Landwirtschaft und Industrie." The Russian Organization and Production School of agricultural economics developed these premises into an extremely refined theoretical system; see, Aleksandr V. Čajanov et al., *A. V. Chayanov on the Theory of Peasant Economy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986). Arrigo Serpieri, "La Fase Presente dell'Agricoltura Italiana," *L'Italia Economica* 2 (1908): 43.

26. Arrigo Serpieri, *L'agricoltura nell'economia della nazione* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1993). The studies collected in Schultz and Harre insist on agrarianism as a third way between fascism and communism, but in the Italian case it was clearly a third way between capitalism and communism.

27. Arrigo Serpieri, "I rurali e la vita politica," in *Fra politica ed economia rurale*, 2nd edition, Biblioteca di coltura per i rurali (Firenze: G. Barbera, 1937), 56. This interpretation can already be found in Serpieri's report on the peasants of the Upper Milanese, in his disapproval of the combination of factory and rural employment; see, Arrigo Serpieri, *Il contratto agrario e le condizioni dei contadini nell'Alto Milanese* (Milano: Editore l'Ufficio agrario della Società Umanitaria, 1910).

28. Serpieri, "I rurali e la vita politica," 67.

29. Lea D'Antone stressed the discontinuity between the younger and older Serpieri, claiming they represented two approaches to agricultural development; see, D'Antone, "La Modernizzazione dell'agricoltura Italiana negli anni Trenta." Arrigo Serpieri, *Fra politica ed economia rurale*, 69, 147.

30. Arrigo Serpieri, "La politica agraria del dopoguerra (marzo 1924)," in *Fra politica ed economia rurale*, 15. An important indicator of the social importance of farms was the net product, that is, the return obtained from the farm by all labor and capital inputs combined. This was computed as the difference between the value of the saleable production and the reproduction cost of all the inputs not produced within the farm itself. According to Serpieri, "this notion [was] especially helpful for reasons of public economy. The larger the net product per hectare, the larger the income that can be granted to the people—capitalists and workers—that live by it." Serpieri's net product signaled "the maximum social, political etc. convenience of society," rather than society's best economic interests; see, Arrigo Serpieri, *Guida a ricerche di economia agraria* (Roma: Treves Dell'Ali, 1929), 137, n. 1; for a comparison with Laur's social income, see, Walter J. Roth, "Farm Accounting in Switzerland," *Journal of Farm Economics* 13, 4 (1931): 562. Massimo Legnani, "Battaglia del grano e istituzionalizzazione del regime reazionario di massa nelle campagne," in *Le campagne emiliane in periodo fascista: Materiali e ricerche sulla battaglia del grano*, eds. Massimo Legnani, Domenico Preti, and Giorgio Rochat (Bologna: Clueb, 1982), 15–26.

31. Lorenzoni acknowledged the continuity between the policies voted on by the Parliament in 1922 and the fascist law of 1923; see, Giovanni Lorenzoni, "La recente politica agraria italiana e il problema del latifondo," *Rivista internazionale delle istituzioni economiche e sociali* (Jan.–Mar. 1925): 85–94.

32. Giovanni Federico, "Not Guilty? Agriculture in the 1920s and the Great Depression," *The Journal of Economic History* 65 (Dec. 2005). Contemporaries, though, were convinced that "the increase in the price of the industrial products required by agriculture and the farming classes, a rise which was much higher than that in the price for agricultural product," made the situation more serious; see, International Institute of Agriculture, *Agricultural Problems in their International Aspect* (Rome: Printing Office of the International Institute of Agriculture, 1927), 6. On the economic crisis of the 1920s, see, Mario Bandini, *Agricoltura e crisi* (Firenze: 1937).

33. Lorenzoni, *Introduzione e guida*. The concept of type was one of the guiding categories that Italian agricultural economists inherited from a long tradition of empirical studies that included Cheysson; see, D'Onofrio, "Making Variety Simple"; D'Onofrio, *Observing Agriculture in Early 20th Century Italy*. On the difficulty of achieving a clear division of labor between agricultural economists and statisticians, see, Maria Letizia D'Autilia, *L'amministrazione della statistica nell'Italia fascista: Il caso dell'agricoltura* (Roma: Gangemi, 1992). Serpieri, *Guida a ricerche di economia agraria*, 72. The continuity with the methodology devised at the end of the nineteenth century is demonstrated by the long quotations from Coletti's instructions to the technical delegates of the Faina inquiry included in Serpieri's *Guida*, to which Lorenzoni referred; *ibid.*, in particular 100ff; Coletti's summary of Emil Cheysson's method was published as Francesco Coletti, *Come si compilano le monografie di famiglia: Estratto dallo Cheysson e Focillon* (Roma: Bertero, 1906); see, also, Francesco Coletti, *Programma questionario dell'inchiesta per i delegati tecnici* (Roma: Bertero, 1906); on the use of monographs by Coletti, see, Giovanni Vecchi, *In ricchezza e in povertà: il benessere degli Italiani dall'Unità a oggi* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2011), 369; and D'Onofrio, "Making Variety Simple."

34. Mario Bandini, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra: I.*

Toscana (Roma: Treves Dell' Ali, 1931), 6, 13. Bandini actually claimed he had been unable to prepare fully fledged farm monographs, "due to the enormous difficulties we would have encountered in obtaining the data from peasant farmers," *ibid.*, 6.

35. Bandini, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra*; Zeno Vignati, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra: V. Umbria* (Roma: Istituto nazionale di economia agraria, 1931). For an analysis of this famous case, which seemed to constitute a worrying precedent for many landowners, see, Faina's report in "Ministero dell'Agricoltura—Direzione generale dell'agricoltura," vol. 2; and Giuseppe Tassinari, "Alcune osservazioni sulla formazione della piccola proprietà coltivatrice nell'Italia Centrale," *Atti della reale Accademia economico-agraria dei Georgofili di Firenze* 18, series 5 (1921).

36. Alessandro Brizi, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra: IX. Campania* (Roma: Tip. Operaia Romana, 1933). In Portici, Brizi had as his pupils Emilio Sereni and Manlio Rossi-Doria. They carried out part of the field work for the inquiry, particularly the dull work at the *catasto* (land registration); see, Manlio Rossi-Doria, *La gioia tranquilla del ricordo: Memorie, 1905–1934* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1991). Sereni eventually drew up the agricultural policy of the Italian Communist Party, and theorized a land reform that would give small plots to landless peasants; Rossi-Doria succeeded Serpieri at the head of the INEA, and dedicated his life to the cause of the southern Italian peasants. On their years in Portici, see, Luigi Musella, "La Scuola di agricoltura di Portici nell'esperienza di Manlio Rossi Doria e di Emilio Sereni," *Studi Storici* 30, 3 (1989).

37. *Ibid.*, 61.

38. Brizi, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra*, 49, 53.

39. For work that stresses the divide between the more statist Tassinari and Medici and the more pro-market Serpieri, but underestimates the similarities between the two groups, see, Marco Zaganella, *Dal fascismo alla DC: Tassinari, Medici e la bonifica nell'Italia tra gli anni Trenta e Cinquanta* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2010); and Simone Misiani, *La Via Dei "Tecnici": Dalla Rsi Alla Ricostruzione: Il Caso Di Paolo Albertario* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1998).

40. Quoted in Cesare Longobardi, *Land-reclamation in Italy* (London: King, 1936), 20.

41. Lorenzoni, "La recente politica agraria italiana e il problema del latifondo."

42. On the various forms of state intervention, see, *ibid.*, 64. Lorenzoni claims 4.3 billion liras were allotted by the government to land reclamation, while an additional 2.7 billion were expected from the landowners over an expected period of fourteen years (up to 1942). According to Giuseppe Orlando, the fascist period witnessed record investments in agriculture (due primarily to the bonifica) with very low productivity of capital; see, *Storia della politica agraria in Italia dal 1848 a oggi* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1984); State control imposed on the countryside a "*cappa burocratico-consortile*" (bureaucratic consortium), according to Carlo Fumian, "I tecnici tra agricoltura e Stato, 1930–1950," *Mélanges de l'Ecole Française de Rome* 95, 2 (1983): 211. The loss of autonomy of the Federconsorzi, nevertheless, did not stop the expansion of transformation cooperatives; see, Bernardino Farolfi and Massimo Fornasari, "Agricoltura e sviluppo economico: il caso italiano (secoli XVIII–XX)," in *L'agricoltura e gli economisti agrari in Italia dall'Ottocento al Novecento*, eds. Massimo Canali et al. (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2011), 13–70, 42. Giuseppe Orlando convincingly shows how the deflationary policy of the late 1920s damaged family farms, and how the bonifica itself was far from being a thorough and consistent policy in favor of *sbracciantizzazione*, while rural salaries, and the terms of trade between agriculture and industry worsened; see, Orlando, *Storia della politica agraria in Italia dal 1848 a oggi*, 123. For the negative effects of fascist agricultural policies on peasant farms, the beneficial effects the duty on wheat had for large properties, and the reduced effectiveness of the *sbracciantizzazione* in the Lower Po Valley, see, Legnani, "Battaglia del grano e istituzionalizzazione del regime reazionario di massa

nelle campagne." On land consolidation, see, Giuseppe Tassinari, *Frammentazione e ricomposizione dei fondi rurali* (Firenze: M. Ricci, 1922); and Giuseppe Tassinari, *La ricomposizione dei fondi frammentati* (Piacenza: Federazione Italiana dei Consorzi Agrari, Commissione di studi tecnici ed economici, 1924). On the creepy turn of the Swiss *Anerbrecht*, see, Adam Tooze, *Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007).

43. For a contrasting view of agricultural economists, see, D'Antone, "La Modernizzazione dell'agricoltura Italiana negli anni Trenta," 603; quoted in Longobardi, *Land-reclamation in Italy*, 5.

44. For an early but complete assessment of the land reform, see, Giuseppe Barbero, *Riforma agraria Italiana: risultati e prospettive* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1960); in English, see, Robert E. Dickinson, "Land Reform in Southern Italy," *Economic Geography* 30, 2 (1954). In *Land Consolidation in Europe: A Study Based Upon the Work of the Working Party of Consolidation of Holdings* (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen N. V, 1959), Erich H. Jacoby claimed that 15,000 hectares had been consolidated, primarily in the Calabrian Sila. In his examination of the results of the land reform, Barbero stresses, "by comparing the gross saleable production per hectare of the 'new' farms after the agrarian reforms with that of the 'old' farms larger than 20 hectares, we obtain a good index of the effects of the agrarian reform on productivity. In general such index shows an increase between 30% (Po delta) and 100% (Calabria)," Barbero, *Riforma agraria Italiana*, 5.

45. It is informative to read some of the INEA monographs of Tuscan peasant families to perceive how, in the 1930s above all, the rhetoric of smallholdings and peasant families informed the scientific literature; see, Roberto Tolaini, *Contadini Toscani negli anni Trenta: Monografie di famiglie dell'INEA 1931-1938* (Ospedaletto, Pisa: Pacini, 2005); see, also, Introduction, in Lorenzoni, "La recente politica agraria italiana e il problema del latifondo."