

Agrarian Interests, Economic Institutions and the Role of the State. Fascist Land Reclamation Projects and the Intellectual Trajectories of Arrigo Serpieri and Giuseppe Tassinari*

Gaetano Sabatini

University of Roma Tre

Valerio Torreggiani

University Nova of Lisbon

1. Introduction

This article deals with the multi-layered historical evolution of the theoretical interpretation of the relations between State, society and market in Fascist Italy, combining the history of economic thought with that of juridical ideas and utilizing instruments of economic and institutional history as well. To understand such a vast and complex issue, we decided to look at it from a specific vantage point, namely the theoretical and legislative tensions that arose during the 1920s and the 1930s between Arrigo Serpieri and Giuseppe Tassinari, the economist-technicians who directed land reclamation plans under Fascism. In our opinion, this kind of inquiry has the potential to uncover some of the major problems of the time, finding answers to big questions in relatively small places.

Those big questions correspond to the fundamental interrogatives that essentially marked the entire century and relate closely to the advent of industrial mass society permanently structured

* A first draft of this paper was presented at the Workshop “Alla ricerca della terza via. Politica, economia, istituzioni dal primo al secondo dopo-guerra” (Pisa, University of Pisa, 28 September 2018); for the useful comments received the authors are grateful to Giovanni Farese and Marco Zaganella. The authors wrote the Introduction together, Torreggiani wrote §§ 2-3 and Sabatini §§ 4-5.

into organized groups: What role and function does the State have in an industrial mass society? What kind of relations between public and private dimensions? What role of the new collective socio-economic bodies that arose with the industrial revolution? Does private property have, or should it have, social responsibilities? Finally, how is institutional architecture to be shaped in order to manage a complex, multifaceted and conflict-ridden industrial society?

Inquiring into these issues, the present article consists of four parts. First, the entire Serpieri-Tassinari dispute is framed within a broader, more general scenario of the crisis of the Liberal State in the first half of the century and the parallel crisis of its theoretical foundations. Secondly, we analyse the role of Arrigo Serpieri, from the start of his career in pre-war years, in shaping an autonomous and scientifically relevant new discipline, namely agricultural economics, and how the methods he suggested to correct neo-classical marginalism guided his work as Secretary of State for land reclamation in the 1920s and early 1930s. Third, the essay examines how Giuseppe Tassinari picked up Serpieri's baton in leading land reclamation policies, and in particular how he re-interpreted Serpieri's plans in the light both of the radically different socio-economic scene of world depression and also of Serpieri's theoretical legacy. Finally, summing up the entire question, our conclusions support the thesis of substantial theoretical continuity between Serpieri and Tassinari that extends to the post World War II period as well.

Focusing on the biographies of individuals who were significantly engaged both on the scientific and political arena enables us to put the protagonists' actual actions at the centre of the historical narrative. This strategy of inquiry also allows us to highlight the connections between politics and academic speculation, or rather between theory and practice, and the overlapping of different historical periods, an overlapping grounded in the actions – academic and political – of our protagonists, who were directly engaged in the historical reality.

2. Intellectuals in mission: Europe in crisis and the experts

Some years ago, in a volume on the characteristics and development of the 20th century State, Paolo Grossi recalled that the “trajectory of the 20th century is entirely underpinned by a resurgence of the structural economic and social facts,”¹ which at the turn of the century engendered a brand new intellectual trajectory. In particular, mirroring the fundamental transformation triggered by the emergence of industrial mass society, “the law drops its pure clothing of limpidness, which was too restraining, and recovers its carnality.”² The most evident expression of this resurgent carnality – an indication “both of rupture and of persisting struggle”³ – was the rejection of the abstract formality of 19th-century economic and juridical science, anchored in a simplified and reductive understanding of socio-economic relations. Downplaying socio-economic and political experience, the newly established bourgeois hegemony looked exclusively at the entities of a non-interventionist state as guardian of individual freedoms, with no involvement in concrete social dynamics, and at the citizen as an abstract individual disconnected from his social relations. Essentially, the political strategy aimed at maintaining existing socio-economic power relationships against the backdrop of a mainstream narrative of equality.

As noted, around the turn of the century the traditional configuration of power was shaken by the epochal changes that marked the dawn of industrial mass society. One of the distinguishing features of the impending new era was conflict, a conflict that first took the shape of class struggle, or the “social question” as it was called, but that quickly also became, as Hobsbawm made clear, a thirty-year world war between rival nations. Therefore, modernity indeed

¹ P. Grossi, “Novecento giuridico: un secolo post-moderno”, in Id., *Introduzione al Novecento giuridico*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2011, p. 3.

² *Ibidem*.

³ I. Stolzi, “Interpretazione e prassi notarile: un profilo storico”, in G. Conte, S. Landini (eds.), *Principi, regole, interpretazioni. Contratti e obbligazioni, famiglie e successioni. Scritti in onore di Giovanni Furguele*, vol. I, Universitas Studiorum, Mantua, 2017, pp. 467-481.

found its problematic socio-economic, political and juridical origin within this long chronological arch, which runs approximately from the later 19th century through the Second World War.

Encompassing at least the entire first half of the 20th century, the historical process generated by those structural transformations produced consequences on different levels. As regards the history of ideas, the process engendered two theoretical trajectories with distinctive characteristics that nevertheless coexisted and exerted reciprocal influence for a long time. On the one hand, in fact, we witness the demise of many of the myths underpinning the old Liberal order, above all the idea of a State operating outside (or above) tangible socio-economic dynamics, and the cult of the individual and private property; on the other we observe the broader diffusion of the principles of marginalist economics – and more generally of a rationalist culture – within a group of Italian intellectuals who became professionally mature during the period of rapid economic and political development that marked the era of Giolitti. The latter element was instrumental in the emergence of a class of technicians, educated to the cult of positivism and now called to find answers to new and urgent questions in a radically altered socio-economic context.⁴ Among the key issues of the new industrial age, perhaps the most pressing was the proper type of government and society, and specifically how to reconcile the multiplicity of socio-economic interests with the unity of political command and the authority of the central State.⁵ In other words, a solution was demanded to “the problem of the relationship between the unity (always largely fictitious) of a political State power and the multiplicity of bodies (and powers) organized around inter-

⁴ See A. Mortara (ed.), *I protagonisti dell'intervento pubblico in Italia*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1984; P. Barucci, M. Mosca, S. Misiani (eds.), *La cultura economica italiana (1889-1943)*; S. Baietti, G. Farese (eds.), *Sergio Paronetto e il formarsi della costituzione economica italiana*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2012. On agriculture, see L. D'Antone, “L'intelligenza dell'agricoltura. Istruzione superiore, profili intellettuali e identità professionale”, in P. Bevilacqua (ed.), *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea*, vol. III, Venice, Marsilio, 1991.

⁵ A. Gagliardi, *Il corporativismo fascista*, Bari-Rome, Laterza, 2010, p. IX.

ests more or less reducible to merely economic or social interests.”⁶

A great number of intellectuals from a range of disciplines addressed the new questions presented by the new socio-economic morphology.⁷ Among those most closely involved in the problem-solving exploration, a new class of experts, in full continuity with the long-term technocratic vocation of the Liberal State, acquired considerable importance, occupying “a zone suspended between State and society, in the interstices between public administration, universities, enterprises and the lobbying groups of the civil society.”⁸ Consequent to the experts’ engagement, we witness a complex cultural renewal generating brand new, ever more specialized areas of knowledge, such as those of Serpieri and Tassinari, namely agricultural law and economics.⁹ As mentioned, this highly skilled class of expert-technicians was educated at the end of the 19th century in an academic and scientific environment permeated by the intellectual climate of positivism, largely derived from the French liberal tradition. These expert-technicians, heirs to a rationalist and positivist mind-set that had shaped their intellectual tools, found themselves living and working in a society undergoing a sudden, unprecedented transformation, presenting them with radically new problems. They would soon discover the inadequacy of the traditional economic and juridical approaches to devise feasible, attainable solutions.¹⁰

⁶ L. Ornaghi, *Stato e corporazione. Storia di una dottrina nella crisi del sistema politico contemporaneo*, Milan, Giuffrè, 1984, p. 3.

⁷ This process could be grasped, for instance, observing the work of Francesco Saverio Nitti and his associates during the Giolittian era. See S. Cassese, “Giolittismo e burocrazia nella cultura delle riviste”, in *Storia d’Italia*, vol. IV, *Intellettuali e potere*, Einaudi, Turin, 1981.

⁸ A. Monti, “Le retrovie dell’industrializzazione: agricoltura e sviluppo in Arrigo Serpieri”, in G. Disandro, A. Monti (eds.), *Competenza e politica. Economisti e tecnici agrari in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2003, p. 104.

⁹ P. Grossi, *Novecento giuridico*, cit.

¹⁰ See P. Costa, *Lo Stato immaginario. Metafore e paradigmi nella cultura giuridica italiana fra Ottocento e Novecento*, Milan, Giuffrè, 1986, and also G. Melis, *Storia dell’amministrazione italiana, 1861-1993*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1996.

It was Arrigo Serpieri who had the merit of effecting a profound transformation in agricultural and rural studies; in fact, he is considered the founding father of a new autonomous discipline in Italy, namely agricultural economics. As we will see, in line with an interpretation of the role of economists, experts and academics as effective actors within the society – intellectuals “in mission”, as has been suggested¹¹ – Serpieri and his successor Giuseppe Tassinari played crucial roles in the administration of Italy’s interwar land reclamation projects: Serpieri from 1923 to 1934 and Tassinari from 1935 to 1942. The two men, however, took two different theoretical and legislative approaches.¹² Within this dichotomy – whose extent still needs careful verification – the most critical problems of western societies at the beginning of the 20th century emerged clearly: the role and functions of the State; the conception of private property, together with its new social importance; and finally, the relationship between the State and the rising collective dimension of more and more well-organized interest groups. All of these issues underlay the crisis of liberal-positivist theory and practice, which still dominated the education of those experts who were called to prepare national development plans to reorganize a disordered, chaotic and conflict-ridden scenario. Inevitably, the class of expert-technicians had to take a multifaceted path to re-shape their classic scientific instruments, devising new forms and methods to provide the required answers to the crisis of the liberal state during the Giolittian era.

If the theoretical and legislative relationship between Serpieri and Tassinari has been frequently described in terms of at least partial contraposition, the hypothesis proposed here is that their intellectual relationship was more complex (and more interesting) if one considers a series of nuances and details which while unquestionably posing a historiographical problem also furnish a number of

¹¹ L. D’Antone, “L’istruzione agraria e la missione dei tecnici”, in *Competenza e politica. Economisti e tecnici agrari in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, cit., pp. 149-158.

¹² See especially M. Zaganella, *Dal fascismo alla DC: Tassinari, Medici e la bonifica nell’Italia tra gli anni Trenta e Cinquanta*, Cantagalli, Siena, 2010.

invaluable insights into the general intellectual environment of the period. In order to understand the problem in terms of shades and gradations, rather than contrasts and divergences, the essay focuses on the relations – both continuity and rupture – between Serpieri and Tassinari and the mainstream culture of their day. Therefore, we examine how the two evaluated, revised and applied neo-classical economic theory; and at the same time we observe how they measured, reviewed and used the liberal juridical principles governing the relationship between the private and public spheres. Our ultimate objective is to see how Serpieri and Tassinari assessed past theory in order to comprehend the origins of a new conception of the relationships between State, society and market – with a particular and obvious reference to agriculture – that eventually resulted in a discontinuity with the 19th-century liberal State. We argue that this discontinuity took different but not mutually exclusive theoretical and legislative forms in the thought and work of the two men.

3. Pragmatic marginalism

Born in Bologna on 15 June 1877, Arrigo Serpieri descended from a local family of Mazzinian (republican) political faith. His maternal uncle, Agostino Ramponi, an agronomist who had studied in Belgium, ran an agricultural enterprise in San Giorgio di Piano, near Bologna.¹³

Serpieri graduated in 1900 from the Superior School of Agriculture in Milan, where he had studied with Ghino Valenti, Ulisse Gobbi and Vittorio Niccoli, who was his thesis supervisor and then welcomed him as assistant professor of rural economics.¹⁴ Serpieri's academic career was rapid. In 1906 he was appointed professor of agricultural economics at Perugia and then, from 1912 onwards, at Milan. Although his full political involvement would come only dur-

¹³ See G. Tassinari, *Agostino Ramponi, 1852-1936*, Florence, 1940.

¹⁴ On Serpieri's university education see in particular L. D'Antone, "Politica e cultura agraria: Arrigo Serpieri", in *Studi storici*, anno XX, n. 3, 1979, pp. 617-620.

ing the Fascist period, Serpieri's reputation as an expert agronomist led him to cooperate with the government also in 1910-1912, when first Giovanni Ranieri and then Francesco Saverio Nitti called him to draft a reform of the legislation on forests and also to organize the Superior Forestry Institute of Florence.

Generally speaking Serpieri's scientific work deals with what in 1929 he called "the enthralling problem of the limits of State intervention,"¹⁵ which he approached from the specific perspective of agricultural economics. Serpieri first became interested in that issue during his university years in Milan, against the backdrop of the influence of marginalist economics, which would always remain his solid reference point. Important as it was, though, marginalism was not the only influence on Serpieri's thought. A range of intellectuals, in fact, shaped his early education, such as Vilfredo Pareto, Maffeo Pantaleoni, Francesco Coletti, Giovanni Lorenzoni and the cultural reformist environment of the *Società Umanistica*.¹⁶

Nonetheless, when he presented his study on contracts in the region north of Milan in 1910, Serpieri, in full continuity with the neo-classical school, affirmed his complete faith in "the action of those involved; in the inevitable conflicts between the classes which, through those conflicts, reached new equilibriums."¹⁷ Significantly, even as late as 1940 Serpieri still described the economic problem in the following terms: "men living in society have to satisfy their unlimited needs with limited means; hence the need to choose, among different and alternative ways to use those means and to satisfy those needs, the method estimated as the most economic."¹⁸ There-

¹⁵ A. Serpieri, *Guida e ricerche di economia agraria*, Edizioni Agricole, Bologna, 1929, p. 336.

¹⁶ A. Prampolini, "La formazione di Arrigo Serpieri ed i problemi dell'agricoltura lombarda", in *Studi storici*, n. 2, 1976, pp. 171-209.

¹⁷ A. Serpieri, *Il contratto agrario e le condizioni dei contadini nell'Alto Milanese*, cit. in *ivi*, p. 174.

¹⁸ A. Serpieri, *Corso di economia e politica agraria*, vol. I, *L'agricoltura nell'economia della nazione*, Barbera, Florence, 1940, p. XI, cit. in G. Di Sandro, *Arrigo Serpieri: tra scienza e praticità di risultati. Dall'economia agraria alla bonifica integrale per lo sviluppo del paese*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2015 p. 109.

fore, as in the marginalist school, the issue that economists were called on to resolve was, fundamentally, how to allocate scarce resources optimally so as to maximize individual utility, within an analytical framework in which the only feasible unit of scientific research was the rational individual.

Nevertheless, Serpieri never endorsed marginalism blindly or uncritically. Indeed, he constantly filtered marginalist principles through a highly personal analysis grounded in close observation of a rapidly changing socio-economic reality, which led him to original, creative solutions. That is, Serpieri's theoretical and practical approach arose as the by-product of a constant, critical dialogue with marginalism, whose general model he accepted but whose scientific rigidity he rejected. In order to really understand modern industrial society, Serpieri sketched out a series of necessary theoretical correctives, improving on what he described as the method of successive approximations.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it is impossible to truly comprehend Serpieri's scientific development separately from his practical work. His intimate understanding of the agricultural context and problems, acquired in years of field research, underpinned Serpieri's marginalist beliefs, leading him to criticize the mathematical faultlessness of neo-classical theory. Disentangling and analysing its political limits allowed him to open a path to partially heterodox positions: on the functions of the State and the conception of private property; on the relationships between State, citizens and intermediate bodies; finally, on the economist's role in society. It is in this sense that the need for concrete know-how, for the comprehension of reality, was related to the method of successive approximations which, operating as a corrective device, enabled Serpieri to use the neo-classical theoretical baggage – unflawed in its mathematical enunciation – as a general framework but progressively revealing

¹⁹ As noted by Di Sandro, Serpieri took the method of successive approximations from Enrico Barone. See G. Di Sandro, *Arrigo Serpieri: tra scienza e praticità di risultati*, cit., pp. 58-59. On Enrico Barone see also G. Farese, *Enrico Barone. Logica di piano, logica di mercato*, Luiss University Press, Rome, 2011.

the limitations that emerge when the model has to face the proof of the facts.

Therefore, Serpieri perceived economic science – and this is a central issue in our discourse here – not as pure theory but as an applied science. From his perspective, the economist was no longer a pure theorist but now a theorist-technician, the guardian of what was essentially applied economic science. In 1928 he revealed that he profoundly felt “the need for economic science not to close itself off, degenerating into formalism and dogmatism.”²⁰ To sum up, this active, practical and socially involved interpretation of the role of the economist is what enabled Serpieri to uncover the political limitations of marginalism, from which he soon started to distance himself, simultaneously opening to him the path towards government positions.

In this sense, Serpieri’s pre-war works on the state of farming and livestock grazing in Switzerland and on agrarian contracts in the territories north of Milan are essential, like his studies on the peasant struggles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and in the aftermath of the Great War.²¹ These studies, together with the reflections recalled above, brought Serpieri into the ranks of the fragmented intellectual front that supported an alliance between Liberalism and Nationalism to sustain economic progress under the auspices of a strong, interventionist central government. In this view the State had to be the expression of an organic community with “the right and duty”²² to direct and regulate its political and economic functioning. In the words of Aldino Monti, that intellectual front expressed “a single political culture that had different variants depending on the political interlocutor”²³ but that deployed itself consistently throughout the entire first half of the century, between the Giolittian era and Fascism.

²⁰ A. Serpieri, *Scienza dell'economia e politica economica*, 1928, p. 333, cit. in *ivi*, p. 36.

²¹ Serpieri took part in the war as a volunteer, and the experience affected him powerfully, mainly in shaping his views on the repercussions of the war for rural areas. See A. Serpieri, *La guerra e le classi rurali italiane*, Laterza, Bari, 1930.

²² A. Serpieri, “Lo Stato e l'economia”, in *Educazione fascista*, fasc. VI-VII, 1927, p. 23.

²³ A. Monti, “Le retrovie dell'industrializzazione: agricoltura e sviluppo in Arrigo Serpieri”, in E. Di Sandro, A. Monti (eds.), *Competenza e politica. Economisti e tecnici agrari in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2003, p. 104.

In his own area of expertise, Serpieri expressed the commonly shared call for political and cultural renewal and the need to rethink “agrarian policy from the viewpoint of the nation.”²⁴ This nationalist idea led him to reconsider the role of the State, individuals and collective bodies in a perspective that identified governmental policies as the main engines for the promotion of the “balance between all the parts and activities of the nation.”²⁵ Thus Serpieri assigned the State the central duty of “governing the self-regulating mechanisms of the market with the end purpose of reconciling the natural conflict between the social forces to promote the interest of the community rather than of individuals.”²⁶ These ideas underpinned Serpieri’s entire intellectual evolution, as is demonstrated by his study on agrarian contracts north of Milan, in which he pointed out – almost a decade before the advent of Fascism – that in a modern nation “everything contributed, the State, public administrative bodies, and private individuals, to the strong and healthy development of national cooperation.”²⁷ In this way, Serpieri reaffirmed what he had already written at the turn of the century when, analysing the organization of landed properties in Switzerland, he had the opportunity to observe an agricultural scene in which different forms of property organization and economic management coexisted, namely agricultural associations, collective properties, government intervention and individual private property.²⁸

²⁴ A. Serpieri, *La politica agraria in Italia e i recenti provvedimenti legislativi*, Federazione dei Consorzi Agrari, Piacenza, 1925, p. 9.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 52.

²⁶ R. Petrocchi, “L’ideologia ruralista serpieriiana tra concezione politica ed analisi economico-agraria”, in *Arrigo Serpieri e la sua costruzione teorica fra economia politica e realtà settoriale*. Atti del Convegno, Firenze, 22-23 aprile 1993, ed. by A. Marinelli, P. Nanni, Stianti, San Casciano, 1995, p. 83.

²⁷ A. Serpieri, *Il contratto agrario e le condizioni dei contadini nell’Alto Milanese*, Editore Ufficio Agrario, Milan, 1910, cit. in A. Monti, “Le retrovie dell’industrializzazione: agricoltura e sviluppo in Arrigo Serpieri”, cit., p. 119. His interest in Lombard agriculture developed in tandem with Giovanni Lorenzoni’s work for the “Società Umanistica” on peasant labour in the same area. See also A. Prampolini, “La formazione di Arrigo Serpieri e i problemi dell’agricoltura lombarda”, cit., p. 171.

²⁸ A. Serpieri, *Studio sui pascoli alpini della Svizzera*, Tipolitografia agraria, Milan, 1901, pp. 184-206.

Therefore, as Ornaghi emphasized, a common thread runs throughout Serpieri's intellectual trajectory, from his first works until his appointment to run Fascist land reclamation projects in the 1920s. That thread is constituted by his positive evaluation of corporatist associations of economic interests as instruments of public/private socio-economic rationalization and balance. This unchanging attitude emerges from Serpieri's academic works over the years. In the 1910 study on the area north of Milan, for instance, he opined that "the peril of economic isolation" of tenant farmers had to be tackled by creating associations and improving collective bargaining, so as to oppose "the strength of the land-owner with the strength of an association of workers."²⁹ After the war, in his 1920 volume on agricultural contracts, he maintained that wage determination had to be removed from the sphere of bargaining between trade unions and land-owners and automatically linked to the cost of living and essential needs.³⁰ In a sense this was an anticipation of Article 12 of the 1927 Labour Charter. In 1925, on the heels of the Fascist government's authoritarian turn, in reassessing recent agricultural legislation, Serpieri affirmed that "a corporation means not only the shift from conflict to cooperation; it means also furnishing cooperation with an entity of its own" in order, ultimately, not to ignore the natural conflicts between different economic sectors and classes, but to construct an instrument "not aimed at eliminating strikes and labour conflict, but at attenuating the contrasts, reducing the occasions for conflict to the minimum."³¹

These assumptions were obviously in contradiction with the theoretical model of marginalism. Serpieri's answer to this theoretical

²⁹ A. Serpieri, *Il contratto agrario*, cit., p. 355. On the other hand, this was sharply inconsistent with the deep-rooted hostility of agrarian Fascism, which from its origin in 1920-21 was a movement in defence of small landowners and sharecroppers against rural workers. On this see Rogari, "L'agricoltura e le bonifiche durante il fascismo", in *Nuova Antologia*, vol. 611, n. 3, 2013, pp. 244-256.

³⁰ A. Serpieri, *Studi sui contratti agrari*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1920.

³¹ A. Serpieri, *La politica agraria in Italia e i recenti provvedimenti legislativi*, Federazione dei Consorzi Agrari, Piacenza, 1925, pp. 225-226.

incongruity is to be found in his understanding of the neo-classical concept of utility maximization, which he began to intertwine with the mass society of the 20th-century nation-State. Serpieri's central argument was that it was impossible to demonstrate one of the crucial principles of the dominant economic theory, namely the existence of that free market system based on unrestricted competition which alone could guarantee the maximization of utility for the whole national community. It is not idle to note that an expression like "national community" was actually non-existent in the neo-classical economic vocabulary, as marginalism acknowledged only the single individual as a fit subject of economic inquiry and analysis. Therefore, while he accepted the wider mathematical model, Serpieri was also open to a revision of the political consequences of neo-classical liberalism in accordance with the specifics of the modern age. More precisely, he argued that general equilibrium theory worked on a presumed hypothesis – the tripartite model of perfect competition, free market and economic equilibrium – whose effective implementation was extremely challenging, not to say unattainable, in the real world. In short, Serpieri was suggesting that the core tenet of marginalist economics had always been just formally posited by mainstream theorists, never adequately proven.

A gap between theory and reality was unveiled, bringing out the political and social limitations of economic theory. As noted, Serpieri's proposed solution was procedural and theoretical, consisting in the intelligent application of the method of successive approximations. Marginalism was accepted because of its formal and mathematical superiority and taken as the scientific starting-point for any economic model. Yet its application could not be rigid and inelastic but had to be flexible and adaptable, open to the successive approximations that an economist theorist-technician would make in order to reach a better understanding of socio-economic reality. According to Serpieri "progressively abandoning the simplifying hypotheses introduced by the model, and taking into account new elements previously neglected, we can inquire into the modifications produced

within the quantities of the economic system. In this way, we seek to come closer and closer to the reality itself."³²

That argument is central to Serpieri's theoretical approach. He himself observed that "science retreats, while life and history start."³³ Admitting the purely abstract nature of the neo-classical model was a way of declaring that the model itself could be useful in illuminating the socio-economic facts not because it represented them perfectly but insofar as it was a heuristic device for understanding a reality that differed from the theory. Eventually, the practical, not theoretical, ends of the economist enabled Serpieri to imagine a way of understanding society guided by but not unthinkingly limited to neo-classical theory, and deliver an admonition to all those who thought that "it was possible to derive from [the mathematical economists] not merely help in understanding concrete reality but categorical rules and norms of practical behaviour."³⁴ In these cases, Serpieri wrote, "we certainly cannot blame economic science."³⁵

Reflecting on the concept of utility maximization for the nation, Serpieri wondered how "a State can remain indifferent, from a purely economic perspective, to the movement of the population, to the perfection of her working capacities, to the variable intensity of capital accumulation, to technical progress."³⁶ In this respect, it was not automatically true that "an economic system of free private enterprises necessarily led to a maximum of social utility."³⁷ From this point of departure – namely rejection both of free market Liberalism and of the socialist alternative of central control over the means of production – Serpieri embraced Fascism's fledgling corporatist "third way" during the 1920s. In this conception, private property acquired a social function within a corporatist normative framework, with the objective of making individual economic ini-

³² A. Serpieri, *Lo Stato e l'economia*, cit., p. 7.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 17.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 1.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 15-16.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 16.

tiative “the most efficient and useful instrument of the national interest.”³⁸

Therefore, Serpieri’s third way had its genesis in complete acceptance of marginalism and pragmatic correction through successive approximations. Historicizing the neo-classical model by introducing socio-economic elements of that particular historical moment – “the conditions of the system vary over time,”³⁹ Serpieri affirmed – led him to a different conception of the institution of private property, as well as of the previously unmentionable relationship between the public and private spheres. Serpieri was convinced that the neo-classical approach continued to make “a valid case for production activated not by the State, but by private enterprises, although the State had not *to let do*, as dogmatic Liberalism would have it, but *to intervene*, in order to ensure, in the best possible way, the realization of those conditions that the economists called perfect competition.”⁴⁰

It is within this general frame that we must picture Serpieri’s effort to improve land reclamation plans. Coherently with the nationalist perspective, these projects were no longer to be conceived of – as in 19th century legislation – solely as “hydraulic” interventions for health and hygiene but necessarily as *integrated action* for land reclamation. With the co-participation of government and landowners, the projects had to transform the territory, rationalizing it with productive, social and demographic goals. In this perspective, land itself was no longer the “juridical object of a power of disposition or satisfaction”⁴¹ but instead became a place for agricultural life: a means of production that had to serve the individual as well as the entire community.

When called to government positions in the period 1923-1924 –

³⁸ Ivi, p. 21.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Di Sandro, *Arrigo Serpieri: tra scienza e praticità di risultati. Dall’economia agraria alla bonifica integrale per lo sviluppo del paese*, cit., p. 37.

⁴¹ G. Galloni, “Gli strumenti giuridici: 1. La bonifica integrale”, in *Competenza e politica. Economisti e tecnici agrari in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, cit., pp. 327-334.

in correspondence with the “technocratic aspiration of early Fascism”⁴² – and then again between 1929 and 1935, Serpieri started to put his ideas into practice, marking a clear discontinuity with the Liberal past. If the Beccarini Law of 1882 identified land reclamation exclusively as a hydraulic operation of swamp drainage, the Serpieri Law of 1923 envisaged a broader design. The Law was intended to establish solid cooperation between the State and private landowners in order to promote comprehensive agrarian development through extensive public works, such as canals, roads, aqueducts, and farmhouses. The legislative instrument created for this purpose was the consortium, a juridical mechanism for the co-participation of the various actors of the rural world: principally public administration and landowners, but also tenants and sharecroppers. Indeed, the consortium could be seen, as highlighted by Serpieri himself, as an anticipation of the corporation conceived by Alfredo Rocco and first proposed three years later in the Syndical Laws of 1926.⁴³

After that, in 1929, returning to government as Secretary of State for Land Reclamation and president of the National association of consortiums and irrigation,⁴⁴ Serpieri – helped by Eliseo Jandolo as general director – continued his work of codifying the legislation on land reclamation, producing the *Testo Unico* approved on 13 February 1933. Once again, the conviction of the absolute need for joint public and private effort was clear. These two juridical moments, far from conflicting, had to be complementary also in practical improvements: “private property” – Serpieri wrote – “has to perform an essentially social function.”⁴⁵ Reflecting this idea, the new Code declared that landowners’ consortiums were not administrative bod-

⁴² A. Aquarone, “Aspirazioni tecnocratiche del primo fascismo”, in *Nord e Sud*, XI, n. 55, 1964, pp. 109-128.

⁴³ S. Rogari, “L’agricoltura e le bonifiche durante il fascismo”, cit., p. 248.

⁴⁴ He had been forced to leave government in 1924, probably due both to the strong opposition to his law from the great landowners of the South and to the delicate phase of transformation of Fascism into an illiberal regime after the political elections of that year. On this see S. Rogari, “L’agricoltura e le bonifiche durante il fascismo”, cit., p. 249.

⁴⁵ A. Serpieri, “Bonifica integrale ed economia corporativa”, in *Archivio di studi corporativi*, 1930, vol. I, p. 429.

ies of the State but private organizations serving public purposes, i.e. associations that at one and the same time served private ends and publicly relevant objectives. Through what Serpieri called “the impulse, agility, and acumen of private interest,”⁴⁶ land reclamation consortiums would become, according to Article 59 of the Code, “at the same time, public bodies and instruments expressing private interests.”⁴⁷

4. Beyond private property

The foregoing gives a good idea of how, in Serpieri’s thought, public and private, although remaining neatly separated juridical domains, had to cooperate in defining and implementing collective welfare. As we have seen, this was the main principle guiding Serpieri’s activity in leading land reclamation under Fascism.

However, the practical results of Serpieri’s work were scarcely encouraging. Even allowing for the repercussions of the Depression on Italian agriculture in the 1930s, which are impossible to overstate, the criticisms that Serpieri faced immediately after the enactment of the *Testo Unico* were especially sharp. And they only became more severe at the land reclamation congress organized at the Academy of the Georgofili in Florence on 21-22 May 1934. In fact, the Depression fostered a general pattern throughout all of Europe of growing State intervention in the economy. And it was in this respect that Serpieri’s privately organized consortiums were subjected to mounting criticism; they were seen as an obstacle to effective reclamation of swampland. There was an increasingly strong and widespread desire to supplant them with public bodies armed with more authoritative powers against recalcitrant landowners.

Among the intellectuals who defended these positions was Giuseppe Tassinari, one of Serpieri’s most eminent former students.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 440.

⁴⁷ A. Serpieri, *La legge sulla bonifica integrale nel terzo anno di applicazione*, Istituto poligrafico di Stato, Rome, 1933, p. 77.

Tassinari was born on 16 December 1891 in Perugia, where he graduated in agricultural science in 1912. After fighting in World War I, he became Serpieri's assistant at the University of Florence from 1919 to 1921. He then taught rural economics at Perugia until 1925, and finally he became Professor of economics and agricultural politics at Bologna. Between 1930 and 1934 he was president of the National Fascist Confederation of Agriculture, and in this role he attended the congress in Florence in May 1934. The congress marked a decisive shift in his political career, and the next year he began to be involved in government. In January 1935 he was appointed Secretary of State for Agriculture and Forests, as a practical matter taking the place of Serpieri, who was dismissed the same year; and in 1937 Tassinari became Secretary of State for land reclamation.

A few words on the purging of Serpieri from the government are in order here. A better understanding of this event, in fact, will afford insight into the relationship between Serpieri and Tassinari and the meaning of the latter's succession to the helm of the land reclamation plan. As Sandro Rogari recalls, the conflict between Serpieri and some major southern landowners, which had first emerged in 1923-1924,⁴⁸ reappeared in the mid-1930s, when the Crollalanza family accused the Secretary of State of the intention to expropriate them. Over and above this clash, however – which nevertheless has its importance within the process – one gets the impression, Rogari wrote, of witnessing one of those turning points where Mussolini renewed the government in order to prevent other Fascist personalities from gaining excessive visibility. Incidentally, the country was preparing for the war against Ethiopia, whose funding led to a two-

⁴⁸ Serpieri was in contrast with Francesco Rocco, the brother of the Minister of Justice, who became the spokesman for the great Southern landowners' complaints: they were worried that Serpieri was planning to bring northern capitalists to the South and expropriate the land of proprietors who violated the Law. What is more, the complaints were voiced at in a moment of particular weakness of the Government, following the murder of the opposition Deputy Giacomo Matteotti, a criminal act for which Mussolini was considered personally responsible. To avoid unnecessary political tensions, Mussolini elected to remove Serpieri. See S. Rogari, "L'agricoltura e le bonifiche durante il fascismo", cit, p. 248.

year suspension of land reclamations, until 1938, when they resumed with the “assault” on landed estates in Sicily.

From a general perspective, there was quite substantial continuity between Serpieri and Tassinari. Intellectually, the connection is clear in the two men’s scientific approach to the study of agriculture, as is demonstrated by Tassinari’s 1926 essay “*Saggio intorno alla distribuzione del reddito in agricoltura*” (Essay on the distribution of income in agriculture). They also had some specific research topics in common, such as the capitalistic transformation of Italian agriculture and the consequent suffering, and uprisings, of the lower classes. Finally, Serpieri and Tassinari shared a distaste for social conflict, which both saw as the most dangerous element for agricultural development; consequently, both set the intellectual objective of finding an economic and contractual equilibrium that could eradicate the “social question”. Nor were the affinities limited to the theoretical plane. In his overall approach to land reclamation Tassinari essentially continued along the path undertaken by Serpieri, understanding reclamation as public work projects whose ends were not purely economic but also social, demographic and political, with the goal of enhancing the wellbeing of the entire national community.

Tassinari, as we have seen, had worked on this theme already in his early career, focusing on the question of the fragmentation of rural properties. In a volume published in 1922 – *Frammentazione e ricomposizione dei fondi rurali* (The fragmentation and reunification of rural properties) – he analysed the consequences of uncontrolled fragmentation of rural landowning, namely higher labour costs, greater difficulty in surveillance, under-utilization of the land, and problems for the introduction of modern agricultural techniques. Reasoning on possible solutions with an evident view to effectiveness, Tassinari was once again in agreement with Serpieri on the need for a “proper legislative act enabling the constitution of consortiums of landowners with the goal of re-composing their rural assets through an organic re-ordering plan which has the mandatory goal of achieving other advantageous land improvements (roads, water works, irrigation,

etc.).⁴⁹ That is, the juridical tool designated by Tassinari was the same one already chosen by Serpieri to accomplish a new version of land reclamation: the consortium of landowners.

The coincidence, therefore, appears to be complete. Nevertheless, as early as 1922 Tassinari went a step further than Serpieri; that is, he asserted the supremacy of the collective interest and asymmetry between the public and the private spheres, i.e. between national and individual welfare. Where the two interests diverged, or in the event of a technical-financial deficiency in the private sector's realization of legislative prescriptions on public works, Tassinari was convinced that the collective interest had to prevail. In 1922 he wrote: "every man's right on his own properties cannot be considered absolute in modern society as it was in the ancient Roman conception of property, and there are cases, when the general interest is at stake, in which it is indispensable to impose restrictions".⁵⁰ On this hypothesis, Tassinari imagined the possibility of positive expropriation for the public utility, to be enforced when private action or interest clashed with the general interest. This was certainly an extreme measure, and it is interesting that Tassinari endorsed it even in the absence of "the unanimous consensus and against a dissenting minority, in the interest of the greater general good."⁵¹

As time went by, Tassinari became ever more convinced of this position, i.e. the authoritative power and right of the State to intervene in the economic sphere. However, this development was not the consequence of some profound theoretical contrast with Serpieri, but rather the complex product of the radically altered socio-economic scenario owing to the Depression after 1929. It was this epochal change, in fact, that required a new kind of government intervention in the economy, which far from a characteristic of Mussolini's regime alone was common to all western nations.

⁴⁹ G. Tassinari, *Frammentazione e ricomposizione dei fondi rurali*, Regio istituto nazionale forestale, Florence, 1922, cit. in M. Zaganella, *Dal fascismo alla DC*, cit., p. 44.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

There is abundant evidence in support of this hypothesis. In 1931, when he became president of the National Fascist Confederation of Agriculture, Tassinari vigorously supported the thorough revision of Italian trade policy, dismantling the Liberal approach to foreign markets, disdained as incompatible with the corporatist conception of economy and the State, and hence with the well-being of the national community. Tassinari also criticized the 19th century's "most favoured nation" principle, endorsing instead a system of balanced, offsetting foreign trade in order to defend the prices of agricultural commodities which otherwise, in a free international market, would have continued their unending collapse. Once again, this orientation was not a distinguishing feature of the Italian Fascist regime but part of a global tendency towards economic closure and protectionism. In the world Depression, it was now normal – in authoritarian and democratic nations alike – to enact policies to defend national interests and objectives, both economic-productive and socio-political. In Tassinari's opinion, agricultural policy, and land reclamation projects in particular, required progressively greater State involvement, enhancing the powers of the public bodies. Therefore, at the 1934 congress, Tassinari declared: "the old land reclamation agenda, designed principally to increase productivity, had to be supplanted by a different program, one aimed at creating the greatest possible number of jobs within a brand new rural physiognomy, through the profound transformation of the regime of landed property."⁵²

In short, the difference between the trajectories of Serpieri and Tassinari would appear to stem not so much from theoretical divergences as from the passage of time, historical development. The strengthening of State powers over landowners, in fact, was perfectly in line with the consolidation of the State's role of control and coordination during the 1930s in Italy as abroad. It was therefore

⁵² G. Tassinari, Intervento al Convegno sulla bonifica integrale organizzato dall'Accademia dei Georgofili il 21-22 maggio 1934, in *Atti della R. Accademia dei Georgofili*, luglio-settembre 1934, cit. in M. Zaganella, *Dal fascismo alla DC*, cit., p. 39.

easy for Tassinari to note the lack of results produced by the previous legislation in terms of effectiveness, specifically accusing the landowners of failing to do their part within the statutory framework of the Serpieri Law. Significantly, Tassinari was convinced that “where the land reclamation works do not present any complex problem or where the program develops in such a way that the landowners spontaneously pursue transformation of the productive system, this legislative instrument has proved appropriate and the final objective of integral land reclamation has been attained.” Conversely, when “these conditions are absent, the law has proved absolutely ineffective.”⁵³

In conclusion, the shift in the land reclamation legislation enacted after 1938 was the consequence not essentially of some purported mistakes of Serpieri’s but of the altered socio-economic picture, in which the State had to intervene to sustain the initiatives of the private sector, reeling from the economic crisis. In this task Serpieri’s teaching was once again useful, especially where he underscores the need “for the State to intervene where private initiative is lacking or insufficient, or where the political interests of the State are at stake.”⁵⁴ We can say that Tassinari was operating in a context characterized on the one hand by greater difficulties for private economic initiative and on the other by a pressing national political interest. This new scenario was translated, in legislative terms, into the royal decree of 5 September 1938, transforming the agricultural consortiums into moral entities, with greatly intensified public control and supervision, as is shown by the nature of their administrative councils. From now on president and vice-president were named directly by the Minister of Agriculture at the proposal, respectively, of the National Fascist Confederation of Agriculture and the Fascist Confederation of Rural Workers. Moreover, the councils consisted of the representatives of the provincial consortiums of

⁵³ G. Tassinari, *Aspetti economici, sociali e giuridici della bonifica integrale*, 1934, cit. in *ivi*, pp. 68-69.

⁵⁴ A. Serpieri, *Lo Stato e l’economia*, cit., p. 23.

farmers and the members of the local agricultural consortiums. Moreover, in tune with the steadily increasing public presence within the economy, the public nature of the land improving consortiums was asserted by two court rulings (Court of Appeals of Turin on 24 February 1939 and Court of Cassation on 15 March 1940).

5. Two interpretations of the third way and an epilogue

Our research suggests that the theme of the land reclamation programs as they developed in theory and in legislation in interwar Italy, as directed first by Arrigo Serpieri and then by his student Giuseppe Tassinari, is an excellent vantage point from which to get an overview of the evolution of the conception of the State, the individual and the intermediate bodies of organized interests in the intellectual environment of the 1920s and the 1930s. A key moment in this theoretical evolution was the crisis of the Liberal State, the declining influence of its model of social and economic coexistence, which spread throughout Europe even prior to World War I. That ideological crisis derived from the social and economic consequences of the industrial revolution and the theoretical and legislative vacuum of the Liberal approach to governing a modern industrial society.

In this context – aggravated by the disintegration of the world economic order after 1929 – the dispute between Serpieri and Tassinari takes on historiographical importance. Examining, in context, their political trajectories and legislative actions, as well as their relationship with the economic and juridical culture of the past and with the general socio-economic environment, we can see that both men represented what we might call a culture of the “third way”. Both Serpieri and Tassinari, in fact, recognized the limits of the Liberal philosophy of the State. Both postulated greater public intervention in the economic sphere to control and direct private action towards collective and social ends.

In conclusion, the presumed theoretical and legislative clash be-

tween Serpieri and Tassinari appears to consist mainly of nuances rather than outright opposition, their differing positions stemming from the broader change in the general historical context more than from some radical difference in intellectual approach or in the solutions hypothesized. As we have seen, the alignment of Tassinari with Serpieri's ideas was extensive and well documented by the sources. As further evidence of the substantial continuity between the action of Tassinari on land reclamation with that of Serpieri before him, let us cite the significant fact that, in presenting the draft law on Sicilian agriculture in January 1940, Mussolini and Tassinari, who had jointly prepared the document, named once again Arrigo Serpieri as rapporteur to the Senate.⁵⁵

The theoretical and legislative relationship between Serpieri and Tassinari offers insight into the wider picture of the doctrinal transformations within western societies starting with the turn of the century,⁵⁶ in particular the concept of private property, which for both Serpieri and Tassinari needed to acquire a new social function within a framework of State economic planning. In this sense, the thought of both men seems to have been grounded on their clear, irreversible divergence from 19th-century Liberalism. That divergence, which began to appear even before Fascism and continued during the regime, stemmed from a new conception of State and society, within which private property had to serve both private individual and public interests. In this regard, it is well worth mentioning that Serpieri's interpretation of integral land reclamation, and of private property as a social function, was taken up again in the Constitution of the Italian Republic in 1948. Article 44 lays down that landed private property must serve public as well as private purposes.⁵⁷

To conclude, this research opens the way to still largely unexplored historiographical territory, namely the substantial continuity of Italian history in the course of the 20th century. The hypothesis

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 255.

⁵⁶ See C. Fumian, *Modernizzazione, tecnocrazia, ruralismo: Arrigo Serpieri*, cit., p. 3.

⁵⁷ G. Galloni, "Gli strumenti giuridici: 1. La bonifica integrale", cit., p. 334.

certainly needs further inquiry, but the idea is that recognizing the significant differences between the various 20th-century political regimes – Liberal, Fascist, democratic Republic – does not necessarily mean overlooking the profound unity of themes, problems, and projects, as well as individuals and institutions, that constituted the subterranean *trait d'union* between these three historical eras.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ See in this sense the works of S. Cassese, “The Long Life of the Institutions Set Up in the Thirties”, in *Journal of European Economic History*, vol. 13, n. 2, 1984, pp. 273-294 and G. Melis (ed.), *Lo Stato negli anni Trenta. Istituzioni e regimi fascisti in Europa*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2008. In the light of these continuities, it is worth rapidly recalling, just to furnish an example, the personalities of Manlio Rossi Doria and the Svimez group of economists, such as Giorgio Ceriani Sebregondi. See M. Rossi Doria, *La polpa e l'osso. Scritti su agricoltura, risorse naturali e ambiente*, L'ancora del Mediterraneo, Naples, 2005, and G. Farese, *Lo sviluppo come integrazione: Giorgio Ceriani Sebregondi e l'ingresso dell'Italia nella cultura internazionale dello sviluppo*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2017.