

Book Reviews

Carlo Tapia, *A Treatise on Abundance (1638) and Early Modern Views of Poverty and Famine*, edited by Tommaso Astarita and Gaetano Sabatini, London – New York: Anthem Press, 2019, pp. 242.

This is the first complete English translation of Carlo Tapia's "Treatise on Abundance," written in 1594 and published in Naples in 1638. Tapia was a high official and magistrate in the Kingdom of Naples, and in this capacity was involved in governing and supplying the capital city. His Treatise is accordingly of markedly practical character, born of direct experience both with the concrete problems posed by grain provisioning for a growing urban population and with the broader socio-political context in which those problems had to be resolved. Tapia aimed to give public administrators clear suggestions on provisioning policy, so as to prevent the food shortages that commonly derived from rapid alterations in the urban-rural ratio (put simply, by a disequilibrium between hands and mouths), difficulties in coping with needs of the urban population, and consequent hoarding of food. To this end, he developed a precise theoretical approach on the crucial role of the royal bureaucracy as an intermediate professional body between the king and the local landholding aristocracy who exploited the supply system (*annona*) for speculation and private profit.

This translation is the result of the collaboration of two historians: Tommaso Astarita (who translated the text) and Gaetano Sabatini (who wrote the introduction). Astarita is a social and economic historian of early modern Italy,¹ with a concentration on Southern

¹ Astarita 2013; 2005.

Italy under Spanish rule. His interest in Spanish Naples goes back to the beginning of his career in the early 1990s, when he published his pioneering research on the continuity of feudal power in the Kingdom of Naples.² Citing the vicissitudes of the noble Caracciolo family that ruled Brienza and its neighbouring villages for over three centuries, Astarita argues for the continuity of feudal relations between the aristocracy and the peasants they controlled, despite the political and economic transformations that marked the Kingdom of Naples as a whole. In essence, he proposes the resiliency of the feudal structures and their adaptability to the changing global scenario, increasingly ruled by different laws of motion from those governing feudal society.

Gaetano Sabatini is an economic historian of the modern age specialized in the Iberian monarchies and their imperial expansion in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. He has written extensively on the economic impact of Iberian imperialism and colonialism, with the express purpose of determining the consequences for the conquered territories.³ Like Astarita, Sabatini too has investigated the resilience of the feudal power at local level, to elucidate some of the opacities of the economic systems of the early modern empires: namely, the presence among the landholding elites (which provided most of the personnel for the state apparatus) of market-oriented attitudes embedded in feudal relations of production.⁴

Sabatini's interest is evident in his introduction to the Treatise, which sets out the historical framework and primary purpose of Tapia's work. The economic background to the Treatise is the pre-industrial world. In pre-industrial societies, the distribution of the population over the land, in particular the urban to rural ratio, indicates the degree of development of production. In other words, historians postulate a relationship between agricultural productivity and the per-

² Astarita 1992.

³ Sabatini 2010; De Luca, Sabatini 2013.

⁴ Dandolo, Sabatini 2009.

centage of the population that could be redeployed from primary production to other socially remunerative activities: the army, civil administration and religion, commerce, craft production. However, urbanization also involved the movement of landless peasants from the countryside to the city, where they formed a substantial urban proletariat; that is, a class particularly exposed to harvest fluctuations and volatile prices for vital foodstuffs.

In engaging with the problem of provisioning, Tapia emphasizes the key role of the professional bureaucracy (of which he was a prominent member) in this politically delicate matter. The work centers not so much on control over the supply system as on the author's vision of the state and its bureaucracy as a "modernizing" force working in the interest of the king and his subjects ("il popolo," the people), and hence in opposition to the destabilizing power of an acquisitive feudal aristocracy.

Against this background, it comes as no surprise that the main source of inspiration of Tapia's work was the supply system of the Roman Empire. In the early Empire (first and second centuries CE), the population of the city of Rome was between 750,000 and 1,000,000 (and that of the entire empire between 50 and 60 million).⁵ Part of the total annual consumption of wheat (30-40 million *modii*) was commercialized by the private sector (18-25 million *modii*), the rest (12-15 million) was distributed to the poor urban population in the form of allowances (free or at subsidized, politically set prices).⁶ In this process, the primary duty of the state was not so much to secure free food for the poor but to intervene in the market mechanism when supplies ran short and prices rose. The state apparatus (for example, the Prefect of the Annona) had to prevent wealthy landowners and merchants from hoarding wheat and other vital commodities to drive their prices up artificially.

⁵ Temin 2012, 31; Lo Cascio 1997, 45.

⁶ Temin 2012, 32-33.

In the sixteenth century, Naples' peculiar type of growth was raising similar problems. After the severe ups and downs of the second half of the fifteenth century, over the next century-and-a-half the population of the Kingdom surged. In crude numbers, it jumped from 1,800,000 (315,990 households) in 1532, to 2,750,000 (540,090 households), around 3 million including Naples, in 1595.⁷

The city of Naples paralleled the demographic trend of the Kingdom at large. Through the fifteenth century, its rulers had encouraged the growth of the population, which had risen to 115,000 or 120,000 in 1505. The sixteenth century marked a further great increase, from 150,000 inhabitants in the late 1520s to about 200,000 in the 1550s, 225,000 in 1596 and possibly as many as 300,000 in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. In fact, by this time Naples had become the largest city in Italy and one of the largest in Europe.

Naples attracted a vast array of people, including bureaucrats, soldiers, merchants and artisans, but the main reason for the growth of the population was the migration of the poor. From the beginning, the city's demographic expansion was characterized by extensive pauperism.⁸ Tapia's *Treatise* constitutes a response to this urgent problem. The work is divided into five parts, following a substantial prologue outlining the author's ideological and theoretical principles (pp. 39-61). In the first part, Tapia lists all the causes of food shortage, classifying them as either supernatural, natural or accidental. By "supernatural" phenomena, he means those events that transcend the natural order of things, such as acts of God affecting climate, harvests, the spread of diseases, and so on. Among the "natural" causes, Tapia includes type of soil, quality of grain, and the farmer's skill in cultivating his land. Finally, he discusses the actions of men that can create a situation of need. "Accidental" food shortages, he says, are caused primarily by economic actors who buy wheat and hide it, hoarding it for a time of scarcity when it can be sold at higher prices.

⁷ Beloch 1994, 146.

⁸ Calabria 1991, 27-28; Zotta 1978, 172.

The second part of the *Treatise* suggests a series of remedies for shortages due to supernatural and natural factors. Tapia lists eight remedies for supernatural causes and three for natural causes. The third part offers four remedies for the accidental causes.

Looking at this lengthy, and at times verbose, rehearsal of remedies, one readily infers that malfunctions of the supply system were due to both climatic and human factors. A poor harvest or late supply did not cause serious trouble for the populace unless they recurred year after year or were combined with other misfortunes, such as plague, epidemic disease, or protracted warfare. But in the short run a scarcity of grain supply, though of course not unrelated to seasonal patterns in the grain market, could be aggravated by the hoarding of substantial stocks for the political and economic advantage of individuals.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the solutions that Tapia recommends in the last two sections of the *Treatise* (four in Part IV and eight in Part V) mostly concentrate on countering these strategies of speculation. In his introduction, Sabatini argues convincingly (p. 16) that while the first three parts constituted the original work completed in 1594, the last two were added later, most likely at the end of Tapia's tenure as Prefect of Annona, when he had acquired considerable experience in handling the concrete problems of provisioning the city. Tapia aspired to fulfil his responsibilities without recourse to extreme or unpopular measures such as requisition or confiscation, and without burdening the royal finances with purchases at exorbitant prices. Instead, his actions were intended to stabilize the market and control fluctuations. In fact, the remedies suggested include preventing large landowners and merchants from hoarding or exporting food. These interest groups were inclined to hoard their grain stocks (especially in the papal enclave of Benevento) for export to more lucrative markets, such as Flanders, where the Spanish army was at war. Not only was the redirection of grain supplies there lucrative economically, it also strengthened the ties between the Crown and local aristocracies, thus weakening the position of state officials like Tapia. A second recommendation was

greater control over the growth of the city's population, by expelling the "foreign" population when the circumstances so required. However, as Tapia probably knew, expulsion was no solution, as it reduced revenues from indirect taxes (customs duties, sales tax, etc.). In addition, speculation in real estate and rental properties (where poor migrants found shelter) had become an important extra source of revenue for wealthy urban investors; as such, it had received strong stimulus from both city officials and aristocracies. Finally, Tapia calls for economic balance between the various provinces of the Kingdom, so as to respond to local food crisis without resort to external markets. He argues that relying on internal redistribution rather than interregional commerce would limit the mismanagement and outright fraud committed by those involved in grain supply.

Provisioning the city, however, had itself become a highly lucrative business, both for the large landowners and merchant bankers who supplied the grain and for the city and state officials who awarded the contracts and profited from the ventures.⁹ Expanding on this, one may well suspect that Tapia's virtuous proposals were designed chiefly to further his own corporative interests rather than those of the poor. The key implication of the scenario that Tapia describes, however, is independent of his real motivation. What is important in the *Treatise on Abundance* is that both state cadres and landed aristocracies showed a comparable acquisitive attitude to the opportunities offered by the system for provisioning Naples. This suggests the need to rethink the thesis that feudal and market-oriented elites were distinct or opposed power groups.

References

- ASTARITA T. (2013), *Companion to Early Modern Naples*, Brill, Leiden.
 – (2005), *Between Salt Water and Holy Water: A History of the Italian South*, W.W. Norton, New York.

⁹ Calabria 1991, 32-35.

- (1992), *The Continuity of a Feudal Power. The Caracciolo of Brienza*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- BELOCH K.J. (1994) [1937-1961], *Storia della popolazione d'Italia*, Le Lettere, Florence.
- CALABRIA A. (1991), *The Cost of Empire. The Finances of the Kingdom of Naples in the Time of Spanish Rule*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- DANDOLO F., SABATINI G. (2009), *Lo stato feudale dei Carafa di Maddaloni. Genesi e amministrazione di un ducato nel regno di Napoli (secoli XV-XVIII)*, Giannini, Naples.
- DE LUCA G., SABATINI G. (eds.) (2013), *Growing in the Shadow of an Empire. How Spanish Colonialism affected Economic Development in Europe and in the World (XVI-XVIII cc.)*, Franco Angeli, Milan.
- LO CASCIO E. (1997), “Le procedure di recensus dalla tarda repubblica al tardo antico e il calcolo della popolazione di Roma”, in *La Rome impériale: démographie et logistique*, Ecole Française de Rome, Rome, pp. 3-76.
- SABATINI G. (ed.) (2010), *Comprendere le monarchie iberiche. Risorse materiali e rappresentazioni del potere*, Viella, Rome.
- TEMIN P. (2012), *The Roman Market Economy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- ZOTTA S. (1978), “Momenti e problemi di una crisi agraria in uno stato feudale napoletano (1585-1615)”, in *MEFRA*, 90-92, pp. 715-796.

Paolo Tedesco
University of Tübingen