
Simone Misiani, *Banche, agricoltura e Stato italiano. Un saggio introduttivo: 1861-1946*, Bancaria Editrice, 2023.

The engaging book by Simone Misiani is a fundamental contribution to a series of studies promoted by the Luigi Einaudi Institute, which follows the history and development of the banking sector and, in this case, of the agricultural credit. The volume is the product of extensive historical-economic research on public intervention in the agricultural sector, supported by a rich documentary apparatus: as the author states, the shortcomings found in some of the banking sources have been addressed using official documents, budgets and public debate, i.e. parliamentary documents, scientific and popular literature (p. 17). Another entity that promoted Misiani's book is the Fondazione Mario Ravà, which was founded in 1958 with the aim of honouring the agronomist from whom it takes its name. The Fondazione Mario Ravà was a fundamental entity for the development of this research, having shown its interest in carrying out a study on the origins and evolution of agricultural credit in Italy, which must be considered as an "original model also studied and exported abroad" (p. 6). The foundation itself has made its historical archive available, which, together with the documents acquired by the Associazione Bancaria Italiana when the association representing agricultural credit institutions merged into it, constitutes the backbone of this work.

The title of the work, as explained in the preface by the President of the Istituto Luigi Einaudi Maurizio Sella, is a clear reference to the subjects who are protagonists of this study: the volume, in fact, has the ambition of "deepening the contribution that the capital employed in the agricultural sector has ensured to the economic growth process of the entire country, within a broader historical analysis of the relationship

between banks and the territory" (p. 8). The territory, among the main subjects of this study, is understood as "a synthesis between the environment and the economic intervention of individual agents or communities" (p. 8). At the same time, the concept of landscape recurs numerous times, representing "the complex structure of land ownership, cultivation and anthropic presence in the territory" (p. 8).

The author has carried out research which, considering the possible broad methodological developments, has directed towards the conception of "total history" (p. 8), adopting a multidisciplinary approach that is at the same time economic, environmental, socio-cultural and institutional "abandoning the unilinear reading that traces the engine of our history to the process of industrialization of the countryside" (p. 273). Misiani, therefore, wanted to analyse the numerous relationships that develop between capital, land, labour, intermediate bodies and political institutions, with the aim of "contextualising the functioning of agricultural credit", trying to overcome the economic version (p. 273).

The fundamental historiographical acquisitions of the volume are essentially two: through the study of agricultural credit, the book clearly describes the development trajectories of the Italian and European banking history, underlining the essential contribution to the entire process of savings banks, cooperative banks and the *Meliorconsorzio*, i.e. a public law institution which to date had not been considered by previous analyses and advances an alternative analysis regarding the genesis of the 1936 banking reform (pp. 8-9).

The volume provides for further significant elements highlighting the value of the contribution made by this study to the research on the history of credit in Italy. The first concerns the fundamental role of special credit for agriculture, which Misiani explores in depth by bringing out facts and protagonists that had never been considered in previous analyses: through these methods the author focuses on the in-depth analysis of internal relations within the banking world, managing to bring the attention to the relationship between industrial interests and agrarian interests in the period between the two world wars (p. 10). The second element of interest in the volume concerns the contextualisation of the origins of the active role of the State in the economy, which is anticipated by the author to the years of the *Risorgimento* and the liberal regime: in fact, since Unification, the Italian ruling class, had considered the problem of linking investment policy to the transformation of agriculture as a priority.

Motivating the origins of the research, Misiani relates directly to Charles Poor Kindleberger, who recognized the causes of the global Great Depression "in the failure of the United States of America to assume responsibility, after the Great War, for a regulatory function of

money and credit" (p. 13). The author explains, therefore, that this study places Italy "in the circuit of the history of the world economy", opting to use an analytical perspective that positions our country in the global context. Misiani states that "the Italian case demonstrates the validity of the function of the credit system for agriculture and, at the same time, calls into question the classic Ricardian thesis on the city-countryside conflict at the historical origins of capitalism" (p. 13). Furthermore, the Italian example shows that fixed assets on land were a growth factor, being able to consider this resource as an "economic factor of capitalist development and expansion of market relations" (p. 13).

The final objective of the volume, clearly stated in the introduction and in the first chapter, is to analyse "the reciprocal relationship between the credit system and the rural world", which, according to the author, "thanks to public intervention is not shattered in the years of the great interwar transformation" (p. 16). Misiani, in fact, states that "the choice to direct savings towards land doesn't represent a political decision of closure to the market, but rather the recognition of the need, by the State, to act as guarantor of the financial market for the economic recovery and the reduction of unemployment, through the financing of productive investments and the expansion of the number of farmer-owners" (p. 16). The author identifies the main reason for the evolution of the relationship between the agricultural and banking sectors, not in economic interests, but in the prevalence of the system of moral values. The primacy of moral values, in fact, favoured "the government's direction towards a special credit policy to respond to the social conflict of the First World War and encourage recovery from the agrarian crisis of 1927 and the Great Depression" (p. 16).

Regarding the relationship between the credit sector and agriculture, Misiani states that it is essential to underline the relationship between the rural credit model and the cooperative culture: the study, in fact, shows that there was no opposition between "proponents of the public intervention system and the defenders of the liberal model", as the special credit was a response "to the social consequences of the agrarian crisis, in the presence of a strong culture of cooperation and social solidarity" (p. 16). The volume highlights that economists working in banking institutions followed "an ethical motivation rather than economic interests", questioning the ways to "correct the contradictions of the financial market to promote balanced growth" (pp. 16-17). The conclusion of all this leads to the statement that "the Italian special credit model arose in defence of rural society" (p. 17). Furthermore, the research shows that for the Italian ruling class it was possible "to put together, in the same vision, the liberal origin of the economic

thought and a nationalist regime based on the primacy of power politics" (p. 272).

The conclusions of the author, derived from the analysis of the documentary sources identified in banking archives, demonstrate the effectiveness of special credit "for the development and reduction of national inequalities, in a logic of overcoming pure profit" (p. 281). This territorial dynamic made it possible to reduce the city/countryside gap through the impact of investments (p. 282).

The volume is divided into ten chapters, plus the introduction, the conclusions and a rich section in which some exemplary documents have been implemented, selected for the value they have had for research. The historical period analysed goes from the Unification of Italy to the end of the Second World War, following the main events of the political narrative of our country.

The first chapter, which can be considered as a continuation of the introductory section, presents a premise which has the aim of defining the problem of agricultural credit in a historical perspective: the author's intention is to advance a renewed interpretative proposal, considering "the historical moment in which the State has once again become decisive in the economic life of the country" (p. 20).

The second chapter analyses the period from the unification of Italy to the outbreak of the First World War. The author identifies in this period "the premises of the change in economic culture and the birth of banking cooperation organizations, with reference to the crucial issue of investments in land and agrarian reform" (p. 15).

The following chapter focuses on the transitional period between the Great War and the agrarian crisis of 1927. This period, in fact, is considered as fundamental for the history of the countryside, as it presents all the characteristics of the moment of transition between the liberal regime and fascism with its economic and social changes. At the same time, the Great War represents a "watershed for the main industrialized nations, since it rigorously modified the relationship between state and economy" (p. 57).

Chapters four and five, framing agrarian policy within the process of reform of the banking and monetary organisation, are dedicated to the analysis of the 1928 Agricultural Credit Law and the "relationship between capital and the agricultural world" in the context of integral reclamation (p. 15). While the fourth chapter analyses the issue from a political-institutional perspective, the following chapter focuses on the economic-legal aspects, confirming the multidisciplinary vision adopted by the author in this work.

The sixth chapter considers the Banking Law of 1936, defining more precisely the development of agricultural credit in the period of the

global Great Depression. By inserting the Italian case within the networks of the world history of capitalism, Misiani delves into the changing relationship between the State and the economy in the context of the spread of totalitarian regimes in Europe.

The seventh chapter investigates the relationship between credit and the functioning of the policy of compulsory grain storage, starting from the “autarchic turn” of the Italian State. The author points out that the positive development of these policies was only arrested by the war that broke out in the two-year period 1942-1943, as the conflict “constituted a factor of change” that induced rural Italy to deny its consent to the regime (p. 185). The rural population should have “formed the mass base of fascism”, however the “dirigiste policy and the functioning of the system of compulsory storage broke the compromise between peasants and the regime” (p. 186). The conflict deprived farmers of the necessary protections, so much so that the “social fracture that prepared the defeat of fascism, even before the military defeat” worsened (p. 186).

The eighth chapter focuses on the importance of “bank loans to private individuals as a factor in the policy of supporting farmers” in the period between 1928 and 1946 (p. 191). Misiani, with the aim of evaluating the economic and social impact of the measures adopted by the State, considers two main indicators: firstly, it uses the “value of growth in absolute figures and as a percentage of national wealth”; as a second element it takes into consideration the environmental sustainability of investment policies (p. 191).

The following chapter is entirely dedicated to the analysis of the contribution that Luigi Einaudi, starting from the 1920s, gave to the reflection on agricultural credit: this, in fact, is seen by the economist as a complementary form to other methods of public intervention in support of the agricultural sector; about the role of the State, however, Einaudi foresees the function of regulator. The figure of Luigi Einaudi is also fundamental in this volume, since the economist, in addition to being “an eminent financial scientist, an acute historian of economic reality and doctrines, an extraordinary journalist, a great statesman” was, and above all felt like a farmer: for this reason, “his interest in the issues of agricultural credit has always been prompt and participatory” (p. 5).

The final chapter is useful for introducing the themes that will be addressed in the next volume of the work, delving into the question of the credit system during the first years of Republican Italy.

Matteo Nardozi
Sapienza University of Rome