

Simone Misiani, Cristóbal Gómez Benito (eds.), *Construyendo la nación: Reforma agraria y modernización rural en la Italia del siglo XX*, Monografías de Historia Rural, n. 13, Sociedad Española de Historia Agraria (SEHA), Prensas universitarias de Zaragoza, 2017, pp. 538.

The volume edited by Simone Misiani and Cristóbal Gómez Benito is intended to introduce Spanish-speaking readers to the origins and history of the Italian agrarian reform of 1950. It illustrates the importance of this question both from a long-run perspective (from early-modern to contemporary times) and in the framework of the nation-building process that began in 1861 with Italian unification. As the editors explain in the introduction, the Italian case is of “limited historical value” but carries “specific significance in the international history of agrarian reforms” (p. 10), with impressive programs and investments that caught the attention of foreign observers in the years following World War II.

In the last decade, Italian historians have renewed their inquiries into the agrarian reform of 1950, transcending the old debate over its success or failure. If the focus in the 1980s and 1990s was on technocrats and elites, across differing political regimes,¹ more recent work has examined the history of the reform in terms of development programs, regional planning, institutional patterns and international politics during the Cold War.²

¹ See, for instance, the work of Leandra D’Antone, Pier Paolo D’Attorre, Carlo Fumian, and Maria Malatesta.

² The most important publications, in chronological order: N. Gabellieri, *Terre divise. La riforma agraria nelle Maremme toscane*, Canterano, Aracne, 2018; F.C. Nigrelli and G. Bonini (eds.), “I paesaggi della riforma agraria. Storia e gestione del paesaggio nelle aree rurali”, *Quaderni*, no. 13, Istituto Alcide Cervi, 2017; G. Bonini (ed.), *Riforma fondiaria e paesaggio. A sessant’anni dalle leggi di riforma: dibattito politico-sociale e linee di sviluppo*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino Editore, 2012; R. De Leo, *Riforma agraria e politiche di sviluppo. L’esperienza in Puglia, Lucania e Molise (1951-1976)*, Matera, Antezza, 2008; E. Bernardi, *La riforma agraria*

The eight chapters refer to this historiography, but the focus is on the discussions of policymakers, economists, doctors, anthropologists, and others concerning Italian modernization and land reform projects during the first half of the 20th century. The volume, that is, takes rural development as a privileged observatory to explore various theses about the end of peasant society and the emergence of mass society between the liberal era and the 1950s. It also marks the crucial turning point in public policy represented by the Fascist neutralization of the forms of self-organization and municipal federalism instituted during the Belle Époque and its promotion of state centralization, paving the way for the post-war development programs. Finally, placing the Italian case in the framework of new research in a transnational and European perspective,³ Misiani and Gómez Benito's volume throws into question James Scott's hypotheses on the way environments had been shaped in the age of state-led land reform.⁴

To study these social and political changes together, the authors propose three major analytical approaches, corresponding to three different definitions of agrarian reform. The first takes the long-term perspective, describing the context that eventually led to the Italian agrarian reform. From this standpoint, the laws enacted in 1950 are of secondary importance: the reform is instead the ultimate consequence of economic and social processes that stretched over centuries. In the second part of

in Italia e gli Stati Uniti. Guerra fredda, Piano Marshall e interventi per il Mezzogiorno negli anni del centrismo degasperiano, Bologna, il Mulino-Svimez, 2006; M.L. Di Felice, *Terra e lavoro. Uomini e istituzioni nell'esperienza della riforma agraria in Sardegna (1950-1962)*, Rome, Carocci-Fondazione Antonio Segni, 2005; M. Brigaglia (ed.), *Per una storia della riforma agraria in Sardegna*, Rome, Carocci, 2004.

³ See, for instance, L. van de Grift and A. Ribi Forclaz (eds.), *Governing the Rural in Interwar Europe*, London-New York, Routledge, 2017, and L. van de Grift (ed.), "Internal Colonization in the Age of Modern Territoriality", *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, 3 (2), 2015.

⁴ See J.C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998.

their introduction, the editors set out, for non-Italian readers, the historical and political landmarks (the annex, pp. 525-530, offers a helpful list, in chronological order, of the main legislative measures on land settlement from 1862 to 1992). The chapter by Rolf Petri surveys the most important questions (productive and commercial policies, property rights and farming systems, the role of agrarianism) for agricultural and rural mobilization for national development between the First World War and the economic boom. Renato Sansa describes the transformations of the *Agro Romano* and its role in the food supply of Rome from the 16th century to the city's annexation by the Kingdom of Italy in 1870, when the intensification of farming systems and the reform of large estates became key issues in the national debate.

This agricultural territory near Rome also has a crucial place in the contribution by Gilberto Corbellini, which looks at the social and hygiene conditions of its inhabitants. He analyzes the enquiries and the programs against malaria that were undertaken in the second half of the 19th century and had an impact far beyond Italy alone. This chapter can be considered as a sort of transition towards the second approach proposed in the book, which focuses on experts and their place in the projects for developing agriculture and transforming the countryside. Here, agrarian reform is understood as a matter that experts could mold according to their scientific, professional and political engagement.

The members of the Italian school of agricultural economics, with their heterogeneous intellectual and political trajectories, are the protagonists of this highly interesting part of the book, with its inevitable references to more extensive works by the various contributors. The active participation of the experts in the debates on land reform and rural change, and their influence on central and local government action, are explored through their own writings and archival material. Aldino Monti investigates the professional and political engagement of the two "anti-Fascist disciples" of Arrigo Serpieri: Manlio Rossi-Doria and Emilio Sereni. That is, Monti seeks out the substantial and enduring influence

of Serpieri's integral and empirical approach on different ideas, reform programs and socio-economic models. Simone Misiani follows the career of Nallo Mazzocchi Alemanni in various research centers and advisory services, up to his direction of the regional bureau for the colonization of the Sicilian latifundia in the 1940s. His work on projects for drainage, land settlement and colonial conquest shows the common thread through different schemes of social engineering and territorial planning, supported by technical assistance and educational programs. The chapter by Marco Zaganella is the only one that focuses specifically on the agrarian reform of 1950, through the case of the Tuscan Maremma. Here, the struggle between Communists and anti-Communists for political hegemony in the countryside produced a definite result, thanks to the economist and Christian Democratic senator Giuseppe Medici. Under his direction, the local bureau in charge of the reform made the Maremma a success story in which land settlement promoted new medium-sized, modern and profitable family farms.

The third thematic axis of the book identifies the Mezzogiorno in the 20th century as an observatory and experimental laboratory whose dynamics could attract not only historians but also other social scientists, in Italy and abroad. The agrarian reform of 1950 is identified here as a crucial turning point in how the society and the popular culture of the Italian South were considered. Gino Satta analyzes the importance of post-war studies on the Southern peasantries as part of the emergence in Italy of a new anthropology sharply distinct from the positivist approaches of the previous period and carrying on the analyses of Antonio Gramsci and Ernesto De Martino. The case of Lucania (Basilicata) shows how, in the 1950s, the areas of the agrarian reform became ethnographic fieldworks promoting original research on subaltern groups and their culture. Luca Bianchi and Stefano Prezioso describe the dynamics of the emigration from the Southern regions that began following the agrarian reform in 1950 and has continued right down to the present. They show how the lack of public and private investment, the gap in social capital, and the crucial role of

family-based welfare regularly produced outflows of population from the depressed areas.

Given that three different definitions have been sketched out above, the place of agrarian reform in this collective work has to be questioned. In these analyses, the reform is omnipresent but its importance is secondary. The central subjects are rather nation-building and rural modernization. In fact, the laws of 1950 and subsequent policies intervened when the crisis of the peasant society and the rural exodus were already well advanced. So it is no surprise that the book considers the reform, in a way, as the endpoint of initiatives and projects that had begun a century before. This broader perspective is welcome, especially for a book addressed to non-Italian readers, but it also calls for a few closing observations.

Almost all the chapters concentrate on Central and Southern Italy, even though this choice is not explicit in the general plan of the work. Admittedly, this was the part of the country most affected by the 1950 reform. However, this focus threatens to narrow the discussion to the backward areas only, when a crucial issue for the reform was actually the relationship between farming, labor and landownership – hence the hypothesis of applying the reform to both intensive and extensive agricultural systems. Greater attention to the North-South divide and interregional inequalities would have set the interconnected dynamics of the developed and underdeveloped agrarian parts of Italy within the recent debates on the interwar and postwar governance of the rural world.⁵ It would also have provided a basis for comparisons with Spanish agricultural policies since the 1930s, say, or the US-backed land reforms in Japan and West Germany in the early years of the Cold

⁵ See M. Frey and C.R. Unger (eds.), “Rural Development in the Twentieth Century: International Perspectives”, *Comparativ*, 27 (2), 2017, and P. Brassley, “Land reform and reallocation in interwar Europe”, in R. Congost and R. Santos (eds.), *Contexts of Property in Europe. The Social Embeddedness of Property Rights in Land in Historical Perspective*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, pp. 145-164.

War.⁶

One of the work's best qualities is its emphasis on the transnational significance of the Italian agrarian reform, an aspect brought up repeatedly. Some traditional sites of transnational and global crossings are evoked, such as the League of Nations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the New Deal, and the Marshall Plan. The transnational dimension is recurrent in the careers of the experts, and finally evident in the two republished contributions that enrich the volume. In a long interview (pp. 366-402), the economist Giuseppe Barbero revisits his education in the United States, his role in the 1954-56 enquiry on the Italian agrarian reform financed by the FAO, and his job as land settlement expert in various countries, especially in Latin America. The Mexican anthropologist Ángel Palerm Vich, in his 1962 report on the Italian agrarian reform (pp. 403-504), searches for lessons to guide the projects of the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Development Bank.

These transnational traces would have warranted further investigation, however. It would have been interesting to look for the networks of experts, the circulation of ideas, scientific co-operation and institutional transfers, following the proposals set out in some recent research with specific attention to agricultural and rural questions.⁷ The pioneering works of Tiago Saraiva on the circulation of techno-scientific objects have demonstrated how European fascist regimes built an alternative

⁶ For a comparative and long-term perspective on agrarian reforms, see the special issue J.-P. Jessenne, P.F. Luna and N. Vivier (eds.), "Les réformes agraires dans le monde", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 63 (4/4bis), 2016, and H. Bernstein, "Land Reform: Taking a Long(er) View", *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 2(4), 2002, pp. 433-463.

⁷ See L. Fernández Prieto, J. Pan-Montojo and M. Cabo (eds.), *Agriculture in the Age of Fascism. Authoritarian Technocracy and Rural Modernization, 1922-1945*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, and M. Herren, "Fascist Internationalism", in G. Sluga and P. Clavin (eds.), *Internationalisms. A twentieth-century history*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 191-212.

modernity relying on biological innovations and agricultural science.⁸ Similar questions could have been raised about rural planning through the study of the analytical tools and methods applied to observe, describe and orient economic, social and demographic dynamics, as suggested in Federico D'Onofrio's book on Italian agricultural economists.⁹ Thanks also to the central position of Rome in the international discussion on agriculture and food in the 20th century, *Construyendo la nación* finally confirms that the Italian agrarian reform is not a strictly national story but also fertile ground for further investigation, connecting the local to the global level.

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⁸ See, in particular, T. Saraiva, *Fascist Pigs. Technoscientific Organisms and the History of Fascism*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2016, and Id., "Costruire il fascismo: autarchia e produzione di organismi standardizzati", in F. Cassata and C. Pogliano (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali 26. Scienze e cultura nell'Italia unita*, Turin, Einaudi, pp. 203-239. For a political history approach, see also E. Bernardi, *Il mais miracoloso. Storia di un'innovazione tra politica, economia e religione*, Rome, Carocci, 2014.

⁹ See F. D'Onofrio, *Observing Agriculture in Early Twentieth-Century Italy. Agricultural Economists and Statistics*, New York-London, Routledge, 2016.