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Peasant cooperatives and land occupations in the Sicilian latifundium (1944-1950)

Niccolò Mignemi

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Peasant cooperatives and land occupations in the Sicilian *latifundium* (1944-1950)

Niccolò Mignemi

Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, Italy was still largely a rural country: with the vast majority of the population employed in agriculture, social crisis was typically construed as a “peasant question.” Ever since political unification in 1861, the Italian countryside had been characterised by economic and social problems, marked by deep and persisting land inequalities as well as archaic contractual arrangements. Although fascism had adopted ruralism as a central theme in its official propaganda and had encouraged the modernization and rationalization of capitalistic farming strategies, the mechanisms of peasant dependence and poverty remained unchanged. Thus, in the specific conditions of the mid-1940s, rural social conflicts dramatically reemerged.

Starting from the Southern regions, the mass mobilization spread out across the countryside, becoming one of the most impressive and urgent mass movements in twentieth century Italy.¹ It was a heterogeneous social movement that encompassed a wide range of different social groups working in agriculture: the wage labourers of the Po Valley; the sharecroppers of Northern and Central Italy, as well as their homologues of the South; small tenant farmers from all over the country; and the broad

¹ See the two volumes of *Campagne e movimento contadino nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi*. Bari: De Donato, 1979-1980. On the history of the peasant movements in Italy and particularly in the Southern regions, see also: *Mezzogiorno e contadini: Trent'anni di studi*. Quaderni dell'Istituto romano per la storia d'Italia dal fascismo alla Resistenza, n. 4, 1981; CRAINZ Guido; NENCI Giacomina, “Il movimento contadino”. In: BEVILACQUA, PIERO ed. *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea. III: Mercati e istituzioni*. Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1991, pp. 597-668; MASELLA, Luigi, “Braccianti del Sud: una ricognizione storiografica”. In: D'ATTORRE, Pier Paolo; DE BERNARDI, ALBERTO eds., *Studi sull'agricoltura italiana: Società rurale e modernizzazione*, Annali della Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, a. XXIX, 1993. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994, pp. 195-222; NENCI, Giacomina. *Le campagne italiane in età contemporanea: Un bilancio storiografico*. Bologna: il Mulino, 1997.

category of poor peasants from the Southern regions.² Although they are seen as different elements within a common movement, in fact the aims and the strategies of these groups were essentially diverse, with the postwar conjuncture inducing only a temporary convergence within them.

Driving the social conflicts, and as evident in the debates on agrarian structures and agrarian reform, there are three different but coexisting questions: 1) the *land question* concerns the distribution of the large estates and the attribution of non-cultivated land; 2) the *contractual question* concerns the conditions fixed in tenancy and sharecropping arrangements; 3) the *labour question* focuses on work costs, wages and unemployment. Although in theory referring to different social groups (small and landless peasants, tenants and sharecroppers, hired labourers), the three questions are in fact deeply interrelated. In the Southern regions, not only do they coexist within the same geographical contexts, but they are often combined in the same person – who owns a tiny piece of land, while renting land from others and supplementing his income through seasonal wage work in order to survive.

Here we focus our attention on the first question – concerning land – to analyse the ways in which peasant collective agency used the *cooperative* as an instrument in the battle for access to land.³ We analyse these developments in the context of the *latifundia*-dominated and grain-producing regions of the interior of Sicily, where the peasantry is traditionally identified as archaic and deeply individualist. We will focus attention on the province of Caltanissetta, in the central part of the island, chosen as an exemplar of the economic and social structures that typically dominated in rural Western Sicily.⁴

As several inquiries during the first half of the twentieth century attested, wheat dominated the countryside of Caltanissetta, with a notable contribution by tree crops in the southern part. A large part of the rural

² ROSSI-DORIA Manlio, “La situation des campagnes italiennes”. *Les Temps modernes*. a. II, n. 23-24, pp. 448-453, 1947.

³ For a detailed analysis of the struggles of the Sicilian wage labourers, see DI BARTOLO, Francesco. *Lavoro, salario, diritti. Vent'anni di lotte bracciantili in Sicilia (1948-1968)*. Rome: Ediesse, 2011. For a general synthesis of social conflicts in postwar Sicily, see BRUNO, Roberto. “*Ci chiamano barbari*”: *Lotte sociali e movimento sindacale in Sicilia nel secondo dopoguerra (1943-1950)*. Naples, Rome: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2011.

⁴ See *Inchiesta parlamentare sulle condizioni dei contadini nelle provincie meridionali e nella Sicilia. Volume VI: Sicilia. Relazione del delegato tecnico Prof. Giovanni Lorenzoni*. 2 volumes. Rome: Tipografia nazionale di Giovanni Bertero e C., 1910, and the English extract in LORENZONI, Giovanni, “Latifundia in Sicily and Their Possible Transformation”. *International Review of Agricultural Economics*. n.s., n. 1, 1923, pp. 316-349.

population was concentrated in agrotowns, facilitating social control of manpower, and the *latifundium* system occupied an important place in the organization of local agriculture. Land concentration was a significant phenomenon, with the 1927 special inquiry registering 122 large estates over 200 hectares, occupying more than one third of the total provincial surface. But the distributive inequalities did not prevent land fragmentation or the existence of a large class of smallholders: at the close of the 1940s, 80% of the landowners had no more than 2 hectares (ha), with an average plot size of 0.6 ha.⁵

In general, *latifundia* are extensively cultivated, according to a rotation cycle combining wheat, beans, pasturage and fallow. However, the property unit rarely corresponded to the farming unit, and the “fragmentation of land and labour was the rule.”⁶ Landholders often lived in the urban centres and governed their business through local representatives. They typically rented their entire estates to middlemen, the so-called *gabelloti*, who divided the portions to be cultivated into small plots (1-4 ha) to sublet to poor peasant workers through short-term contracts (2-6 years) with a share tenure of fixed rent (paid in cash or kind).⁷

In the post-Second World War period, the province of Caltanissetta was at the heart of the social and political conflicts that took place in Sicily. The important role played by the Communist Party in the local peasant movement was the counterpart to the power accumulated by the most significant figures of the Christian Democrats, who had transformed the province into their electoral domain. At that time, the local mafia had considerable economic interests in the agriculture of the area, which it sought to preserve in the face of ongoing social dynamics, as the violence of certain episodes attest. Here, we evoke this schematically without going into details. Adopting the “point of view” of the cooperatives within postwar rural social conflicts, our attention will be mainly focused on the economic

⁵ See the regional volume of the national inquiry *La distribuzione della proprietà fondiaria in Italia*. Rome: INEA, 1947-1948 and the monograph on the INEA inquiry on the small peasant property PRESTIANNI, Nunzio, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra. IV: Sicilia*. Palermo, Rome: INEA, F.lli Treves Dell’Ali, 1931. For the 1927 data, see MOLÈ, Giovanni, *Studio-inchiesta sui latifondi siciliani*. Rome: Tipografia del Senato, 1929.

⁶ SCHNEIDER Jane, SCHNEIDER Peter, *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily*. New York, San Francisco, London: Academic Press, 1976, p. 61. See also ROCHEFORT, Renée. *Le travail en Sicile: Étude de géographie sociale*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961, p. 163.

⁷ Together with contractual arrangements, peasant economic dependence and social subordination was finally reinforced through usurious interest rates on anticipated inputs. Consult AYMARD, Maurice. “From Feudalism to Capitalism in Italy: The Case That Doesn’t Fit”. *Review: a journal of the Fernand Braudel Center*. vol. VI, n. 2, 1982, p. 162.

and social mechanisms that explain how, in a given context, peasant agency can be analysed in connection with the characteristics of the existing agrarian pattern.

Legal tools and peasant agency

In a famous article, Hobsbawm emphasizes the importance of the legal dimension to peasant land occupations, where this refers to both “the prevailing official legal system and the legal norms actually accepted by the peasantry.”⁸ Looking at Italian case from the mid-1940s onwards, we argue here that the law can also play a crucial role as a tool adopted by the peasant movement to claim land.

The first land occupations began in the Southern regions at the end of 1943, as a sort of instinctive reaction to the “exceptional conjuncture” of the postwar period, which temporarily destabilized traditional power relations and left large estates untended. But the invasion and occupation of land was not a new phenomenon in these regions, and especially not in Sicily, where it reappears cyclically as a central tool within a “long history” of peasant struggles and revolts. The social struggles of 1919-20 and even earlier seem to have been revived in the ritual and the geographical distribution of the cortèges occupying the latifundia in the mid-1940s. However, the historical context and the power relations that emerged here also have their own specific features.

In July 1943, the Allies invaded Sicily; Italy signed the armistice at the beginning of September, and the Anglo-American army made progressive gains in the Southern Italian regions, while in the North the resistance movement battled against fascist and Nazi forces. April 1944 saw the beginning of a period of coalition government comprising all the political forces of the antifascist front, with an important role for parties of the left. From the installation of the first government, and for the next two years, the Minister of Agriculture was the communist lawyer Fausto Gullo, who promulgated certain measures that are fundamental to the explanation of the further development of the peasant movement in Italian countryside.

Communists, socialists and an important segment of the Catholic party – to mention only the most important national political forces – directly supported the postwar peasant movement, but in 1944-45 their initial concern was to manage social conflicts to create more organized

⁸ HOBBSAWM, Eric J., “Peasant Land Occupations”. *Past and Present*. n. 62, February, 1974, p. 120.

forms of collective action. Confronted by the ongoing mobilizations and driven by the political project of the general agrarian reform distributing the land and radically transforming rural social relations, Gullo promoted several legislative measures. Inspired by similar measures in the past, he provided small peasants and rural workers with legal tools that reinforced their political power in social conflicts. This strategy aimed to federate the large category of the poor peasants within a common political front – although ultimately the risk of internal conflict would prove to have been underestimated. In the present analysis, we focus in particular on the decree of October 19, 1944, which indirectly “legalized” land occupations, giving peasant cooperatives the opportunity to ask for temporary (up to four years) concessions of abandoned and uncultivated land. The measure can be perceived as a sort of exception to individual property rights, but can also be seen as an act which was in effect compelled by the end-of-war context, aiming to reduce rural unemployment and ease the demographic pressure on the land, as well as to expand the total cultivated area and so increase cereal production and grain prices.

The decree on uncultivated land is well known and has been widely popularized. Its consequences were immediately apparent, “authorizing” land invasions and occupations. However, this particular measure has to be situated within a wider perspective on the agricultural policy pursued by Gullo during the postwar transition. Other measures including prolonging tenancy contracts, freezing rents, and adjusting sharecropping terms (giving 40% to the landholder and 60% to the farmers).⁹ In this context, the cooperatives claiming land become a sort of aggregator of all the social struggles taking place within the heterogeneous world of poor Southern peasants. Well beyond the conventional figure of the landless rural proletarian, the mobilization concerned the larger class of smallholders who were typically obliged to supplement their income by renting other landowners’ land or by renting out their labour power as wage or day labourers.

This movement was not revolutionary in the strict sense. Confirming “the entrenched legalism of peasant land invasion,”¹⁰ it pursued its cause through legal means and demanded the application of relevant legislative measures. From this point of view, we can argue that the rule of law was

⁹ These measures were influenced by the extension of the special war legislation on tenancy that was pursued until the end of agricultural year 1946-47. For a general analysis of the measures promoted by Gullo, see ROSSI-DORIA, Anna. *Il ministro e i contadini: Decreti Gullo e lotte nel Mezzogiorno 1944-1949*. Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1983.

¹⁰ HOBBSAWM Eric J., “Peasant Land Occupations”. *Op. Cit.* p. 124, see also ROCHEFORT, Renée, *Le travail en Sicile... Op. Cit.*, p. 167.

being invoked, and was finally transformed into “a central arena of conflict”¹¹ where peasant collective agency tried to influence power relations and gain better economic and social conditions for rural workers. From this point of view, cooperatives became a key element in the political organization of the countryside; but at the same time they functioned as a sort of mediator, officially recognized and given legitimacy in engaging in dialogue with public authorities.

However, the fortunes of the cooperatives were strictly linked to the measures concerning uncultivated land, and thus we need to follow the evolution on the legislative front. Over the years, various modifications were introduced to the original measure on land concessions to peasant cooperatives. The decree of October 1944 would be substantially altered by the decree of September 6, 1946, issued under the initiative of the new minister of Agriculture, the Christian-Democrat Antonio Segni. This measure redefined the notion of “uncultivated land”, modified the institutional mechanisms through which cooperatives could ask for land, and raised the terms of the concession from four to nine years and even more, if special plans for agricultural improvement could be presented. Accused of serving the economic interests of the landlords against the rural workers, Segni defended himself by saying that he was reinforcing the technical and economic dimensions of the cooperative initiative as against the political influence and the “euphoria” of the initial period.

Beyond the debates and the criticisms, the decree of September 1946 was in effect the last measure to substantially affect the place of cooperatives in rural conflicts, even though the legislation on uncultivated land would continue to have effects into the 1950s. Launched under the initiative of Gullo, the measures of 1944-46 contributed to reinforcing the position of the small farmers. At the same time, they were a specific consequence of the conditions of the end of the war, encouraging the extension of cultivated land for food production and managing social conflict in the countryside. But their provisional nature and the absence of permanent legislation made the limits of the decrees evident, once the excitement of the “emergence” period had been overcome.

On their side, the landholders accepted this short-term compromise in order to protect their long-term profits and to mitigate the risk of radicalizing the social conflict. But the coalition government would be progressively undermined. In 1947, the Socialist and Communist Parties

¹¹ THOMPSON, Edward P., *Whigs and hunters: The Origin of the Black Act*. London: Allen Lane, 1975, p. 264.

were excluded from government at the national level, as well as in Sicily where a left-wing front was the primary political force, having gained 30% of the vote in regional elections.¹² The victory of the Christian Democrats in the national election of April 18, 1948 symbolically clinched this shift in the balance of political forces.

In a context dominated by political conflict, the cooperatives could not find suitable conditions to develop and reinforce their scope for autonomous action, and the agrarian reform of 1950 would not recognize their potential role in the process of land distribution and agricultural improvement.¹³ The peasant movement tried to defend the land concessions obtained through the cooperatives, but was not able to make a substantial change to these dynamics, conceiving the “battle over uncultivated land” as a sort of transition phase towards the final aim of general agrarian reform. Over the years, the question of uncultivated land merged into the larger debate on property rights and farming, which in political terms meant the debate on land reform and the reform of agrarian contracts. As Hobsbawm observed, “land occupation in modern politically organized peasant movements is an incident in a long-term campaign.”¹⁴

At the same time, the long-term dynamics of the peasant farmers purchasing the land through “traditional” market mechanisms started up again at the end of the 1940s. The postwar dynamics of the land market were slow and non-linear, but they were able to “absorb” a part of the “peasant desire” for land. Even though the speculative operations drained a part of their resources, some contextual evolutions (i.e. risk of agrarian reform, growth in the cost of labour, decline in agricultural prices, more profitable investments) encouraged several big landholders to break up their large estates, supplying the market with a great number of small and medium plots. Thus while the market for large and medium farms stagnated during the postwar period, the market for small plots was characterized by an intensity of transactions, further encouraged by the effects of the decree

¹² On the Sicilian case, see SANTINO, Umberto. *La democrazia bloccata: La strage di Portella della Ginestra e l'emarginazione delle sinistre*. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino Editore, 1997.

¹³ Different recent works on the Italian agrarian reform can be cited: BERNARDI, Emanuele. *La riforma agraria 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. By the same author “Estados Unidos y la reforma agraria italiana (1947-1953)”. *Historia agraria*. n. 54, August 2011, pp. 141-174; MISIANI, Simone. “Colonización interior y democracia: la reforma agraria italiana de 1950”. *Historia agraria*. n. 54, 2011, pp. 105-140; *Riforma fondiaria e paesaggio. A sessant'anni dalle leggi di riforma: dibattito politico-sociale e linee di sviluppo*. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Istituto Alcide Cervi, Rubbettino Editore, 2012.

¹⁴ HOBBSAWM Eric J., *Op. Cit.*. “Peasant Land Occupations”. p. 129.

of February 24, 1948, introducing tax breaks and subsidies in favour of small peasant property.

Rhythms and evolutions of the rural struggles

Thus, although the peasant movement launched a massive campaign of land occupations, the outcomes obtained by the cooperatives in terms of enduring concessions were limited, and in the end rather incidental to the overall evolution of agrarian policies in Italy. Of course, we might then ask whether the “cooperative phase” was no more than an exceptional and isolated episode in the postwar history of the Italian countryside. However, even though they were provisional, the measures adopted by ministers Gullo and Segni had a real influence on class relations in the local agrarian contexts. The mechanisms they introduced temporarily suspended the traditional conditions of precariousness and subordination. The cooperatives become a key element with this, as the rapid and prominent development of the phenomenon in the traditionally non-cooperative Southern regions confirmed.¹⁵

According to official statistics, between 1944 and 1956, peasant cooperatives countrywide submitted 27,885 requests to the local section of the civil court, which was responsible for the question.¹⁶ In Italy overall, 2.3 million hectares of uncultivated land were demanded, and 9,060 concessions were authorized on nearly 300,000 ha. The final outcome was limited – concessions were temporary and soil quality often poor – but not irrelevant as compared to the 767,000 ha distributed over three decades by the 1950 land reform. At the same time, it is interesting to observe that more than half of both the requests (13,973, totalling 1,023,722 ha) and the authorised concessions (4,798, totalling 190,229 ha) preceded December 31, 1947.

The postwar peasant movement was a national movement, but the phenomenon of land occupations was geographically polarized in favour of Southern Italy, with Sicily being the most prominent region in numerical terms.¹⁷ Here, 4,832 requests were submitted, for a total of 906,743 ha, and

¹⁵ On the cooperative tradition in Sicilian agriculture, see CANCELLO Orazio ed., *Storia della cooperazione siciliana*. Palermo: IRCAC, 1993.

¹⁶ See the yearbook *Annuario statistico dell'agricoltura italiana* of the Istituto Centrale di Statistica for the data on the first half of the 1950s.

¹⁷ On the Sicilian case and the role of the peasant cooperatives, see RENDA, Francesco. “Il movimento contadino in Sicilia”. In: *Campagne e movimento contadino* Cit.. *Volume primo: Monografie regionali*, 1979, pp. 557-717 and the chapter in *Storia della cooperazione siciliana. Op.Cit.* There is also the collective volume MARINO, Giuseppe

987 concessions were authorized on 86,420 ha, 80% of in 1944-47 (855 concessions on 73,024 ha). Data collected by the National Agricultural Statistics and Economics Office (UNSEA) provides further information about the origins and the characteristics of the 65,030.91 ha conceded to cooperatives up to 1949. This land represented more than 40% of the total of 157,468.22 ha belonging to 403 private landowners and 45 public or private collective owners (state, provincial or municipal properties, church, charities and others).¹⁸

A static analysis of the cooperatives' action as regards uncultivated lands needs to be integrated by a dynamic one. Using the records produced by the local commission in the provincial civil court, we are able to go into the details of the yearly and monthly dynamics of the authorized land concessions in the Sicilian province of Caltanissetta.

The two provinces of Agrigento and Caltanissetta lie at the heart of the social movement asking for the distribution of uncultivated land via cooperatives, both located in the *latifundia*-dominated grain-producing regions of the central Sicily. Largely dominated by small tenant farmers and sharecroppers, the struggles here focused initially on the contractual question, seeking to negotiate better contractual arrangements with the landholders. But, very quickly, cooperatives developed to seek access to the uncultivated land: in the territory of Caltanissetta the cooperatives managed 1,686 ha in 1944-45, 7,205 ha in 1945-46, and 10,977 ha in 1946-47 – that is, about 60% of the total geographical area obtained after the Second World War.

Analyzes have long identified two phases in the Italian peasant movement of that period: the first phase, from 1944 to 1946, was characterized by traditional forms of primitive rebellion or simple *jacquerie*; the second phase, more organized and culminating in the mass mobilisations of autumn 1949, was dominated by the debate on agrarian reform.¹⁹ This framework has already been subject to criticism, and here we will

Carlo, ed., *A cinquant'anni dalla Riforma agraria in Sicilia*, Quaderni del CEPES. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2003.

¹⁸ See *Indagini particolari nel settore agricolo: Concessione di terre incolte o insufficientemente coltivate, in applicazione ai decreti Gullo e Segni*. UNSEA. Estratti dal Bollettino Mensile di Informazioni dei mesi di agosto e settembre 1949, Rome, November 1949, tab. 7-8.

¹⁹ See, for example, TARROW, Sidney G., *Peasant Communism in Southern Italy*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1967, pp. 245-248. For a critical analysis of this perspective, see *Nord e Sud nella crisi italiana 1943-1945: Atti della tavola rotonda, Catania 14-15 marzo 1975*. Istituto siciliano per la storia dell'Italia contemporanea (ISSICO). Cosenza: Pellegrini Editore, 1977.

reconsider it further, exploring how the land concessions in favour of the peasant cooperatives evolved in the province of Caltanissetta.

The first concessions in Caltanissetta, eight in number, were decided by the local commission between May and October 1945. Preceded by a phase of interruption, authorised concessions returned in force at the end of August, peaking in the “explosion” that began in October and continued until December 1946: by the end, 72 concessions would have been authorized on 7,736 ha. Another pause (only 8 concessions on 567 ha) occurred at the beginning of 1947, following the regional pact signed between the peasant movement and the organizations of the landholders to respect the agricultural calendar and protect yearly production. The concessions grew again in the second half of 1947, perhaps “encouraged” by the strategies of the left-wing forces that at the time were trying to capitalize upon their positive results in the 1946 regional election and relaunch their political initiatives in anticipation of the 1948 national election. Thus, in the province of Caltanissetta, from August until the end of 1947, the local commission authorised 64 requests from the cooperatives, pertaining to 5,531 ha. However, it is plausible to argue that the 1947 peak is only a “final flare,” and that in fact it concludes the “cooperative season” on the uncultivated land of the latifundia. In 1948, only six more concessions would be authorized, on 2,131 ha.

If we use the information concerning the requests presented and the land assigned to cooperatives as a proxy for how power relations were evolving in rural social conflicts, the dynamic observed belies an analysis which sets the primitive rebellions of the first phase in opposition to the politically organized struggles of the second. In fact, the cooperatives’ action appears more effective and the peasant movement more powerful before 1947, which is then confirmed as a sort of turning point within the rural social conflicts in general. However, we have also to consider that the results obtained by the peasant movement on uncultivated land in some ways followed a sort of natural cycle: at the beginning of the peasant mobilization, large surfaces were available and land occupation through the cooperatives was relatively easy; but over the years, as more concessions were authorised, the competition increased and the amount of unoccupied uncultivated lands declined. Against this “natural frontier,” the sole alternative seemed to be the redefinition and the constant renegotiation of the superficially technical notion of “uncultivated land.”

Therefore, in the requests from the peasant cooperatives to local commissions, as well as in the counterattacks mounted by landholders, the frontier separating the cultivated from the uncultivated land was no longer

fixed on the basis of strictly economic and agricultural criteria. Mediated by the law, different social groups often exploited the same technical arguments and resorted to apparently neutral, apolitical notions to serve their own strategies. In the end, in all the local contexts, the cultivated–uncultivated frontier became subject to permanent renegotiation in accord with existing power relations.

Thus far we have observed these evolutions by adopting a yearly perspective, but the analysis of the monthly patterns in the land concessions to cooperatives can provide additional elements to better understand how peasant collective agency operated on uncultivated lands. Reviewing, on a monthly basis, all the concessions attributed in the province of Caltanissetta between 1945 and 1950, we can identify a sort of annual cycle wherein the vast majority of the land concessions tended to be concentrated between the end of August and the end of November. Naturally, peasant mobilizations and social struggles intensify after harvest, and the end of the summer corresponded to a period of intensified lobbying of local commissions. At the same time, the seasonality of the concessions seemed to follow the agricultural calendar and the traditional expiry date of the agrarian contracts, which, in the grain-producing regions of Sicily ended on August 31. What we seem to observe, then, is an ongoing attempt to mediate social conflicts, providing cooperatives with a solution to their needs by the beginning of the new agricultural year, in order to ensure future production, ploughing and seeding on a surface as large as possible.

Looking at the data for the province of Caltanissetta, the yearly cycle of the land concessions to cooperatives was characterised by two peaks: the first, during the spring (April to June), concerned a limited number of vast areas; the second, during the autumn (October to December), concerned a high number of small areas.

The two peaks seem to be explicable by different factors, and we will try to analyze these seasonal patterns and propose a possible interpretation. On the one hand, the spring peak in general concerned large estates that would have been cultivated since the beginning of the new agricultural year: the decisions of the commission were motivated here by productive concerns. On the other hand, the autumn peak was often influenced by ongoing social mobilizations and land occupations: for political purposes, these concessions aimed to stabilise situations of unrest and prevent the development of existing conflicts. Thus, they needed to satisfy a higher number of requests, even if this strategy would induce land fragmentation and finally prejudice the value of the concessions attributed to cooperatives. Reality, of course, is always much more complex than our models, and we would need additional evidence from other contexts to fill

out this picture: nevertheless, we can reasonably suppose that our considerations are probably pertinent for the larger part of the grain-producing areas of Sicily and for other similar regions as well.

Cooperative paths and peasant agency

Encouraged by the specific conditions that prevailed in the postwar period, the peasant movement adopted cooperatives as a central instrument in rural social conflict. On the formal side, the law identified the cooperatives as the only legitimate body able to request uncultivated land. On the practical side, the cooperative became a fundamental component in socializing peasants and organising collective agency in the countryside. We might, then, ask which dynamic prevailed, and so try to determine whether the cooperatives emerged autonomously, or as a response induced by institutional initiatives. But in fact neither of the two processes appears predominant, and at the local level the top-down dynamics interacted with the bottom-up dynamics, rather than the two being opposed to each other.

As we have seen, in seeking to obtain uncultivated land the cooperatives acted in the name of the peasant movement and negotiated directly with the local commissions and landowners. Provincial federations supported and advised the affiliated cooperatives, which, through their delegates, followed the development of formal procedures, participated in the technical inspections of the estates requested, and defended the cooperatives' interests when controversies emerged. When concessions were authorized, the cooperatives became the official holders, providing guarantees for rent, dictating contractual obligations to members, and monitoring the respect of the farming guidelines fixed by the local agricultural department. At the local level, cooperatives emerged as a crucial actor in mediating relations both with public and also with private institutions. Thus, for example, they would take out collective loans, or ask for subsidies to provide working capital. Operating on the input and the output markets, they reinforced the bargaining power of their members and thus improved their economic opportunities. They also developed social initiatives and different forms of mutual aid.

Placed in charge of the formal concession, the cooperative also became the arena in which the different actors involved – namely, the members – decided how to govern and how to exploit the land they had obtained. In fact, the unity of large estates was rarely maintained and the land was in general fragmented into small plots of 3-5 ha, and distributed to the members for individual cultivation. This mechanism encouraged land

fragmentation and potentially transposed local conflicts and social hierarchies into the membership of the cooperative. In the end, the risk was that the cooperatives would reproduce the characteristics and the dynamics of the latifundia system. Collective farming could have been an alternative, but this solution was rarely adopted and was always half-hearted, except for cases where a collective effort was needed, such as for land transformation and agricultural improvement.

In the end, the impact of the peasant cooperatives can fairly be judged to have been limited; but their rapid and important development after the Second World War is evident, even in the most remote regions of Southern Italy. This was not the case, for Sicily, however, where a significant and mainly rural cooperative movement had existed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Presented as a possible solution to transforming economic processes and social relations in the latifundia, farming cooperatives were at that time one of the most important and innovative regional manifestation of the phenomenon of modernization, well known even beyond national borders.²⁰ The context of the 1940s, however, was totally different, and reference to a sort of “regional tradition” is not enough to explain the substantial development of the cooperative movement in the countryside.

In 1949, the UNSEA inquiry registered 1,187 cooperatives with 246,576 members in Italy, and 290 cooperatives with 100,511 members in Sicily alone, cultivating about 65 thousand hectares.²¹ Here, the plots assigned to members had an average surface of 1.45 ha, but only 44,730 members (86.5% farmers and 13.5% other professional figures) had effectively obtained land. At the national level, the proportion of members having obtained land was higher (60.6%), but of the total surface area of 166 thousand hectares, the average plot was only 1.11 ha. This gap revealed the limits of cooperative action on uncultivated land in Sicily, but can also be interpreted as a proof of the key role attributed to cooperatives within the social conflict over access to land.

We can observe these dynamics at the local level using the data collected for the province of Caltanissetta. Here, 64 cooperatives asked for land concessions between 1944 and 1954. They are drawn from almost all the municipalities of the area and in the adjacent provinces of Agrigento and

²⁰ On the farming cooperatives in Sicily at the beginning of the twentieth century, see *Storia della cooperazioni siciliana. Op. Cit.* and RENDA, Francesco. *Socialisti e cattolici in Sicilia, 1900-1904: il giovane Sturzo, le lotte agrarie, la mafia*. Caltanissetta-Roma: Salvatore Sciascia editore, 1972.

²¹ See *Indagini particolari nel settore agricolo. Op.Cit.*, tab. 1.

Catania. They were created in the period 1944-47, with only four exceptions: two cooperatives were created in 1938-39, one in 1925 and the last – the only one that dates to the pre-fascist period – in 1919. Between 1944 and 1950, these cooperatives presented 1,021 requests to the local commission concerning 259,260 ha. By the end, 161 concessions – ranging from 25 ha to more than 1,000 ha – were authorized on 87 estates and for a total of 18,234 ha. Together with Agrigento (with 320 concessions on 19,367 ha in 1952), Caltanissetta was the province where the peasant cooperatives obtained the greatest results on uncultivated land.

The most important national political forces were – directly or indirectly – engaged in the rural social mobilizations through their local federations. Other studies have explored these aspects via precise and detailed studies realized at the micro level,²² and it is not possible here to go into the details of the complex and peculiar local–national relations that emerged in every specific context. Schematically, however, we may say that Catholic and socialist-communist initiatives often coexisted in the same local contexts, where they would eventually compete to gain leadership over the rural population. Nevertheless, the political forces manifested similar attitudes and strategies, endorsing the “allied cooperatives” that could finally serve as unions or local sections of the national parties. As Tarrow observed, for the Communist Party (PCI) this connection seemed fundamental, because “the cooperatives gave the PCI the opportunity to appear in the South not as an electoral party seeking votes or as a working class party seeking alliances, but as the authentic embodiment of peasants’ aspirations for the land.”²³

The cooperatives became a key actor within the postwar conflicts over land, and even landholders, middlemen and big rural entrepreneurs sometimes adopted the strategy of creating pseudo-cooperatives to defend their own land against the risk of the forced concessions.²⁴ But the peasant movement, too, developed some innovative arrangements to serve its own strategies, as proved, for example, by what we could call the “estate cooperative”: in these cooperatives, the tenant farmers and sharecroppers of a given estate associates themselves with the explicit aim of collectively renting land which they already exploited individually. From this point of

²² For the province of Caltanissetta see, for example, VITALE, Francesca Paola. *La memoria dei comunisti nisseni*. Palermo: Istituto Gramsci Siciliano, 1988.

²³ TARROW, Sidney G., *Peasant Communism... Op. Cit.*, p. 282.

²⁴ Although it focuses on the 1920s, an interesting analysis of cooperatives as an arena for local social conflicts over land is provided in DI BARTOLO, Francesco. “Imbrigliare il conflitto sociale. Mafiosi, contadini, latifondisti”. *Meridiana*. n. 63, 2008, pp. 33-52.

view, it is interesting to observe how the cooperatives tried to “absorb” and stabilize the actors and economic relationships.

However, the cooperative movement on the uncultivated land could not guarantee peasants a definitive redistribution of property rights. At the same time, several intrinsic limits undermined the long-term prospects of the postwar “cooperative phase”: the land identified as uncultivated was in general poor and marginal; the period of the concessions was very short, discouraging land improvements and agricultural transformations; and no financial resources or subsidies were given to sustain productive investments.

Through collective agency, however, peasants could negotiate better contractual and working conditions, even if only for a limited period. This crucial fact induced the emergence of certain contradictory dynamics, which transposed into the cooperative the local and internal social conflicts of the peasant movement. While an inclusive spirit prevailed during the initial mass mobilisation, the economic and professional disparities progressively segmented the strategies pursued by every social grouping involved in the rural conflict over land. The class composition of the rural population and the social hierarchies were finally reproduced within the cooperatives, with the latter eventually even becoming “the tools of local clientele groups.”²⁵

Whether adopted, manipulated or perverted, in the postwar transition the cooperatives served as an attack on uncultivated land and finally gained a deserved place in the long-term history of the peasant struggles for land.²⁶ From this point of view, it is interesting to observe that collective action through the cooperative did not exclude recourse to alternative and individual strategies, such as the land market or, after 1950, the distributive mechanisms introduced by agrarian reform. In the province of Caltanissetta, for example, between the end of the war and 1952, about 22,000 ha were sold or attributed with an emphyteutic lease, in favour of approximately 4,000 farmers. Certain specific measures encouraged this dynamic and, between 1948 and 1950, the law on small peasant property allowed 1,074 smallholders in the area to increase their estates, buying 4,915.22 ha, and creating 1,192 new smallholders on 2,364.68 ha.²⁷

Two further processes would contribute to the decline of the peasant cooperatives of the postwar period: the mass migrations out of the Southern countryside towards the urban centres and the Northern regions; and the

²⁵ TARROW, Sidney G., *Peasant Communism... Op. Cit.*, p. 282.

²⁶ ROSSI-DORIA, Manlio. “La situation des campagnes italiennes”. *Op. Cit.*

²⁷ The 2,266 smallholders on 7,279.90 ha in the province of Caltanissetta correspond to about one third of the 6,523 smallholders on 22,772.29 ha globally subsidized in Sicily.

“great transformation” of Italian agriculture wherein sector-based and corporatist strategies were progressively imposed. However, even where individual strategies prevailed, the recourse to collective agency was not entirely abandoned. It can still be seen, readapted to serve individual purposes, in, for example, negotiating the effective application of reform measures or seeking a compromise when the debt burden risked undermining the acquired assets. Many cooperatives disappeared during the 1950s; others attempt a sort of reconversion as service, supply or marketing cooperatives. But scarce resources limited their ability to act autonomously, and they were often obliged to turn to political forces or public institutions to survive.²⁸

Conclusions

Our analysis confirms the complex nature of the Italian postwar peasant movement. The political dimension of the phenomenon needs to be explored at the national and local levels, as other works have done and others are already doing, adopting a “view from below” to interrogate the interconnections between the two levels.²⁹ The present article has proposed an economic and social history of the peasants’ claims for land, situated within the larger history of Italian rural social conflicts in the late 1940s. It is thus a history of both individual strategies and collective mobilisations. The cooperatives were a crucial part of that history, and by focusing on them we are able to occupy a “privileged observatory” on the agrarian dynamics of the interwar period. In conclusion, we will try to examine their contribution to the ongoing transformations: did the action of the cooperatives on the uncultivated land really have any concrete effects; or were they only a parenthesis, their significance restricted to a specific conjuncture of circumstances?

It must be noted that the cooperatives did not achieve permanent redistribution of assets nor did they develop an entrepreneurial alternative model like the farming cooperatives of the first decades of the twentieth

²⁸ See SCHNEIDER, Jane; SCHNEIDER, Peter, “Economic Dependency and the Failure of Cooperatives in Western Sicily”. In: NASH, June; DANDLER, Jorge; HOPKINS, Nicholas S. eds., *Popular participation in Social Change: Cooperatives, Collectives, and Nationalized Industry*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1976, p. 291.

²⁹ From this point of view, an interesting debate has been developed over a number of years by the journal *Annali dell’Istituto Alcide Cervi*, in which see in particular n. 3 (1981) on the topic: *Le campagne italiane e la politica agraria dei governi di unità antifascista (1943-1947)*. For recent works, see for example DI BARTOLO, Francesco. “Una complessa relazione tra gruppi”. *Snodi. Pubblici e privati nella storia contemporanea*. n. 5, 2010, pp. 44-63.

century. Peasant access to land would definitively remain governed by other – more traditional – mechanisms. Nevertheless, we may also make a strong case that their role was not negligible in the postwar transition. Invoking “the right by labour”³⁰ to legitimize land occupations and by embodying the “danger of land reform” for big landowners, the cooperatives temporarily influenced power relations at the local level. They reinforced the position of the small farmers, offered an additional source to augment household incomes, and provided crucial inputs for yearly agricultural production.

We can interpret the cooperative as a provisional but not irrelevant instrument in peasant everyday life, one which eventually had significance for their individual and family strategies. These results are based on analysis of the specific case of the province of Caltanissetta. Although further research will certainly be necessary, we can reasonably hypothesize that our considerations could be generalized to other Southern Italian regions characterized extensively by grain-producing agriculture.

Hobsbawm distinguishes three types of land occupation, “depending on the legal situation of the land to be occupied.”³¹ In the Sicilian case, the concessions to the cooperatives were invoked, but the property title was accepted and the rule of law reaffirmed: the peasant movement finally came to contest the economic rather than the legal basis of the *latifundium*. Rather than pursuing radical subversive strategies, or manifesting a “primitive desire” to gain land, the small and landless farmers attempted to reinforce their bargaining power and intervene over contractual arrangements, seen as the crucial mechanism governing power relations and the distribution of economic value between workers and landowners.³² Thus, the postwar transition can eventually be located within the silent and more hidden long-term history of the rural social conflicts that pre-existed the “explosion” of the mid-1940s and which would be perpetuated throughout the radical transformations of the Italian countryside.

³⁰ HOBBSAWM Eric J., *Peasant Land Occupations. Op. Cit.*, p. 122.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³² See *Exploiter la terre. Les contrats agraires de l'Antiquité à nos jours. Actes du colloque de Caen, 10-13 septembre 1997*. BÉAUR, Gérard; ARNOUX, Mathieu; VARET-VITU, Anne. eds., Rennes: Association d'histoire des sociétés rurales, 2003, and GIORGETTI, Giorgio. *Contadini e proprietari nell'Italia moderna: Rapporti di produzione e contratti agrari dal secolo XVI a oggi*. Turin: Einaudi 1974.