

LAND REFORM AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE. A SOCIO-HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE IMPACT OF 1950'S ITALIAN LAND REFORM ON PROPERTY RELATIONS AND CLASS FORMATION IN THE *MEZZOGIORNO*

DANA DOMȘODI¹

ABSTRACT. This paper retraces the historical, structural, socioeconomic and political conditions of the Italian land reform, from the 1950's, with a particular interest in the dynamic of class formation and property relations reconfiguration before and in the aftermath of the agrarian reform. We particularly discuss the class reconfiguration processes that ensued after the reform, displaying a particular interest in analysing the transformation of the class of absentee lords (latifundists) into a capitalist proprietary or entrepreneurial class, while rural landless or poor laborers - the new small owners - suffered further deterioration of their socioeconomic condition under the generalization of capitalist property forms, dissemination of market constraints and imperatives into Southern agriculture and the reconfiguration of social relations within the capitalist mode of production.

Key words: land reform, property relations, land redistribution, *questione meridionale*, social history

Introduction²

By the end of the sixties, the academic interests regarding the impact of the Italian land reform of the 1950's seemed to have dissipated, and only recently, and quite sporadically, academic scholarship from such diverse fields as social history, political economy or (agrarian) sociology, have renewed their interest in the matter. The reasons for such a recovery of the socioeconomic and

¹ Department of Sociology, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babeș-Bolyai University, dana.domsodi@ubbcluj.ro.

² This article has appeared with the support and in the context of the project "Cercetător, Viitor Antreprenor: Noua Generație" POCU 123793, implemented by University of Babeș-Bolyai in partnership with AJOFM Cluj.

political legacy of the Italian land reform are multiple, but we can list here some of the most significant: the study, backed by empirical data, of the socioeconomic real impact of the reform taking into consideration the *longue durée*, the long and lasting political consequences of those reforms and their weight on the party-power balance of the Italian Second Republic; then, the necessity of mapping the gradual transformation of the social structure in terms of class relations and property relations, in the aftermath of what was dubbed at that time an “important case of redistribution of wealth and productive capacities in a society” (Bonanno, 1988:132); and finally, the discussion, in ampler and with transnational implications, of the state-supervised process of class reconfiguration under both economic regional pressure and internal concurential political pressure.

This article aims to become a contribution in the field of social history, focusing on the issue of social transformation, with a special emphasis on the process of class formation and the dynamic of property relations. Our discussion of the impact of the Italian land reform from 1950 will touch several aspects: first, the specific socio-politic dynamic surrounding the land reform, namely the political confrontation between the Christian Democrat party government rule and the Communist party pressure coming from below, as leftist politics got a stronger hold over laboring industrial and agrarian classes; and second, on the contradictory nature of the social outcomes of a reform that distributed land with the goal of creating a new and “genuine entrepreneurial class of small proprietors” (Mariuzzo, 2013) in the deep Italian South, and failed to do so, whilst strengthening further the political and market power of large landowners and rural oligarchies of various types. Framing the problems in such terms moves the debate from the “difficulty of replacing semi-feudal relationships of dependence (between peasants and latifundists) by market regulated relationships” (Mariuzzo, 2013) to the structural laundering of (semi)feudal property forms and social relations of economics-political dependence into pure capitalist economic relations and proprietary forms. This in the context on an already, pre-reform, ante and interwar, asymmetric market-power of feudal landed elites, prime beneficiaries of (semi)feudal extractive and exploitative relations of production in Southern agriculture, where a high concentration of landed property “resulted in their owner being relevant agents in the considered market” (Martinelli, 2012:2), whilst landless or poor peasants struggled socioeconomically under seigneurial drudgeries.

We will show that simple land redistribution/property-transfer to landless or poor peasants, in the context of prior and ongoing politic and economic control of the process of production exercised by large landowners through Demo-Christian political support and market leverages, cannot bring about the desirable transformation of property and production relations in the

benefit of rural labourers, nor a favourable modernisation of the agricultural production for labouring classes, and this necessarily so, given its anchorage into the generalisation of capitalist property forms and constraints. Moreover, the accepted compromise of partial efficiency of land redistribution by the rural poor, in the Italian South, further insulated the latter from State institutions and political support of radical leftist parties, whilst the process of the “disaggregation of the agricultural landscape” (Sereni, 1961:355) unfolded further under elite control for more than four decades past the date of the land reform in 1950.

Concisely put, we hold that the land reform was a process of capitalist transformation and accommodation of the feudal landed class to new conditions of production and property, while small newly propertied rural poor were left economically and politically exposed after ‘trading’ leftist support and actions of land seizure for formal contracts of property over pieces of land, some of inferior production capacity or too small even for the sustainment of individual households. Moreover, peasants’ ulterior inability to hold the property claims over their newly distributed land, led to a further process of land concentration and acquisition by third parties, such as Northern industrialists, city-based bourgeois, state employees and administrators, mobsters, former rural labour-supervisors or bailiffs and others, whom together formed a new strata of rural elites, adding yet another heterogeneous layer to the chain of peasant labour exploitation in Southern Italy.

To the two classic versions of feudal landlord tenure dissolution: compete defeat of the *Ancien Regime* and transfer of property to rural labourers, and the English textbook case of elimination of customary rights of the cultivators in favour of feudal landlords turned agrarian capitalists (Boserup, 1965:79), the land reforms of the twentieth century seem to offer a third way. In the case of the Italian Land Reform, as we will see later, we have a strange combination, a so-called “hard fought hybrid solution” (Berardi, 2006:349), of the two paths described by Boserup: a clear loss of land by the latifundial class in the favour of landless or poor rural workers, on the short run, but also, paradoxically, a transformation of feudal rights into modern/capitalist property rights and the creation of a capitalist landed bourgeoisie, on the medium and long run. With this second outcome, the social conflict between propertied and dominant classes versus working rural class started anew, but this time, with all the economical and political capitalist advantages on the side of (old) new rural elites. The dissolution of large/manorial estates, under condition of capitalist globalization, governed by feudal conditions of property, entails the transition of agriculture towards a market-capitalist system of production, governed by different property rights and built upon a different set of social and production relations.

Preliminary remarks: ruling elites juggling class politics

A few preliminary remarks are still necessary, starting from a question: What is the purpose of land reforms or major land redistribution, beyond the first intended effect, namely the process of land redistribution towards landless peasants? Although responses to this question diverge, they gravitate around the issue of political support or class power balance recalibration. On the one hand, it has been argued that the objective is to create long term political support or generation of “lasting political returns” (Acemoglu, 2001; Galli, 1993; Zucco Jr., 2013), on the other hand, precisely regarding the case of Italian Land reform, that it represented a cumuli of state policies which were instrumental in the political battle between Democrazia Cristiana party (DC) and Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), the former “redistributing land in an effort to halt the rise of Communism in the countryside” (Caprettini, B et al, 2019:1). Moreover, the land reforms undertaken in 1950, have shaped the inter-parties power balance, in the favour of the Christian Democrat party, a political victory spanning over the entire duration of the Italian Second Republic, until the political crisis of 1993-94, when DC, and the Italian Socialist Party collapsed and disappeared altogether from the Italian political scene in the context of an astounding scandal involving charges of corruption, collusion with the Mafia, embezzlement - the *Tangentopoli* affair (Anderson, 2005).

There is also another point worth considering, namely the relationship between land reforms and bridging socioeconomic inequality, on the one hand, and the response of (un)democratic elites to such processes of asset redistribution, on the other hand. The discussion of this issue serves as a context for the political implications of the Italian case already briefly outlined above. Land redistribution is usually the tool of young democracies in search of a rapid solution for structural economic and political imbalances, and “this preference is the main reason why landowners are less prone to being in favour of democratic transitions and are more willing to use force to preserve non-democracy” (Percoco, 2019: 3). There are different sets of rationales regarding the different parties involved in this process: the State aims for a viable scheme of assets redistribution, such as to generate a viable source of state income; the large landowners class aims for a halting of this process as the redistribution of their properties is bound to create a reduction of wealth and power; finally, the rural workers, poor or landless, struggle for land in its capacity as a crucial resource.

Finally, and this is yet another argument for the study of the Italian land reform, as historically and socially anchored case-study, namely because it brings into the discussion the “socio-historical formation of modern Italy” (Bonanno, 1988: 132), transitioning from an agricultural based economy to an industrial

one, in the context of a structural dualism manifested as the contrast between a highly industrialized North (all Italian regions north of the Po river), with a performant agricultural production and the industrial desertification of the South/*Mezzogiorno* (Sicily, Apulia, Calabria, Campania, Molise), with low rates of productivity and profitability of the agricultural production. Between them, a settentrional belt (Tuscany, Umbria, Liguria, Lazio, Le Marche, etc.) of high economic efficiency of small and middle size farms and firms serves as a buffer between the two antipodes. Thus, the study of such reforms, in Italy, or somewhere else, also brings into discussion the state's role in the reproduction of the conditions and contradictions of modern capitalism. And this, in turn, is highly relevant because this state support for capitalism begets the question of the class nature of the state itself, and consequently, the class character of land reforms. There are various theories regarding the class nature of the state, two of particular interest for our argument: the theory that "State is a class state, bound by capitalist relations of production, yet not in itself capitalist production" (Poulantzas cited by Bonanno, 1988: 134); and that "the State is interested in reproducing the rules and social relationships which are presupposed by the class rule of the capitalistic class" (Offe and Ronge cited by Bonnano, 1988:135). In the case of the role of the Italian state in the implementation of the land reform seems to warrant both these views, given that the Italian state ceded to social pressures from below and above, finally settling for institutional, political and economic support for new and old landed elites in the detriment of new small rural proprietors.

Summarizing, we will show how the land reform, in spite of its stated purpose of land redistribution in the favour of poor or landless peasants, became a state-sponsored process of capitalist transformation of production and property forms and relations in the favour of former feudalists, turned agrarian capitalist or proprietors, similar types of state-sponsorships applying also to other kinds of landed elites. As for the new small rural proprietors, they indeed shacked off the restraints of feudalism dependency, but only to be locked-in in the new hierarchy of capitalist production, where uneven market competition quickly dissolved the economic value of their new properties, while the price of labour plummeted down in the *Mezzogiorno*, on the medium and long run, as the Southern labor market contracted in the absence of a functional industrial sector or a productive agriculture, thus maintaining the monopsonist labour-market conditions working in favour of landed, rentier and commercial elites. In the next sections, we will address the content of the law, the context in which the land reform was made, and lastly we will discuss the impact of the reform, with an emphasis on the argument of this article.

The Land Reform: The Sila, Stralcio and Sicillian Laws

Three laws make up for the Italian Land Reform of the 1950's. On the 12th of May 1950, Sila Law was passed, while on the 28th of October of the same year, the Stralcio Law passed also, followed in December of 1950, by a third and final law, regarding the land redistribution in all the territory of Sicily. These laws targeted large areas to fall under the incidence of the reform, a surface comprising of around 29% of the country's land. The areas in question were: Delta Padano, Maremma, Fucino, Campania, Molise, Puglia, Lucania, Sila, Sicilly and Sardinia (both "strongholds of latifundists"; Elazar, 1996: 240), with an almost immediate result of "latifundia domains reduced by 762.000 hectares, mostly assigned to 109.000 families of *braccianti* and to poor peasants" (Sereni, 1961: 351).

There were three steps for the implementation of the laws: "expropriation of the land; allocation of the new land to the peasants, and development; organization and maintenance of the peasant holding so formed" (Bandini, 1955: 18). The land expropriation and land redistributions laws focused on large inefficient and unproductive farms, owned mostly by absentee landlords, while other large agricultural estates will follow the same fate, according to two parliamentary imposed criteria, size and productivity. According to the Sila law, private estates larger than 300 acres, unimproved, were subjected to expropriation. The expropriated landowners were to receive compensation for the lost land in the form of 25-years fixed-rate government bonds, yielding 5% interest per year.

As for rural workers, they had to apply for land, through a local or regional public body, set up specifically for reform implementation, paying for the land with the help of a 30-years loan, with an interest of 3,5% per year. No land could be sold before the loan was repaid and no loan could be repaid in advance. Ex-landowners were under a different constraint, the interdiction of land purchase for a period of six years. The criteria for obtaining redistributed land were the following:

landless residing in the town; agricultural workers working under sharecropping contracts residing in the towns; all agricultural workers (or landless) residing in other towns of the treated area, but who have been working in the towns for the last three years; all agricultural workers (or landless) residing on town on the border of treated areas; sharecropper with low income; owners of small land plots with low income. (list compiled by Percoco, 2017, p. 5).

Two types of new land properties were created: “the *podere*, or small farm, designed for those who previously had owned no land at all; and the *quota*, to supplement the small holdings of the poorer peasants” (Ginsborg, 1990: 132). The state-support schemes at the disposal of the newly created farms were the following: technical assistance and advisory work, organization of farm co-operatives, grants and funds for improvement, production programs and agricultural credit.

The reforms proceeded with a quick pace and all land was expropriated in the first trimester of 1953 (Russo, 1955), 13% of agricultural land in the South and 18% in the North (Marciani, 1966: 38). Between 1950 and 1951, approximately 800.000 hectares of land were redistributed, this situation significantly changing the landscape of land ownership, and, over time, the total surface of the land distributed amounted to 8,6 million ha.

Although both Sila and Stralcio Law, together with the third Law regulating Sicily, are the constitutive acts of the Italian land reform of 1950, the Stralcio law is the one that was truly in effect, being the work Antonio Segni, Minister of Agriculture between 1946 and 1951. We will quote here at length some of the articles of this law, because they reveal interesting aspects, namely the conditions in which redistribution of the land is to take place, while also indicating the legal loopholes regarding how large landowners could actually keep their land secured from redistribution. We argue, that in the body of this law, the compromise between landowners and DC is inscribed and made law. The legal provisions of interest are the following:

The landowners are entitled to retain one-third of the land which might be expropriated from them, provided they undertake to carry out intensive farming and radical improvements of it. Once he carried out these improvements, the owner can keep half of the one-third in question but must give up the other half to the reform Agency, against repayment of the expenditure which he has incurred through the improvements. c) Under Article 10 of the Law, certain lands are excluded from expropriation if they are well organized and efficient model farms. Some of the criteria used for determining this are: the existence of stable tenure relations, crop yields at least 40% above the average for the district, an average labor input of no less than 0.30 man-units per hectare, superior economic and social conditions for the workers; sanitary conditions of the workers 'or tenants' dwellings. (Bandini, 1955: 17)

Although the reform formally aimed at levelling the economic game-field between the socioeconomic power of latifundists and peasants, in fact pre-existent advantages in terms of both capital and assets could be capitalised as

exemptions from the law, under productivity and improvement clauses, clearly advantageous to the large landowner class. Moreover, through work-extensive procedures of farming, characteristic for the economic work-model of manorial estates, the rates of productivity per hectare could be raised through high labour exploitation practices to match those considered economically viable of technologically-intensive farming. Moreover, these law articles represent a clear sign of things to come regarding the importance of productivity and improvement clauses that will become crucial in the selection farms that were to become the beneficiaries of State and regional sustenance schemes, while other will be excluded from such types of State support. These clauses will have drawn the line between productive and unproductive farming production units in the following decades, becoming also units of measure and exclusion from the market and the profit game of poor rural proprietors, the latter lacking the capital and the institutional support for improving their new lands or competing on the market with more productive farms from Central and Northern Italy or from Europe. Only very large Southern estates could sustain this competition benefiting from the exploitation of a large pool of cheap local agricultural labour force and flooding of the market with cheap agricultural products.

Land reform in context. Sealing the fate of the Mezzogiorno

The socioeconomic premises of the reform were dire. Post-war Southern Italian agriculture was backward and unproductive, and most rural laborers did not own any land, in the context of widespread sharecropping and tenant contracts. The Italian regions that will become the focus, but never a stronghold, of the Communist Party interest and ground organization for social actions, such as land occupations and protests, were, for example, in 1948, the home of 2,5 million landless rural workers and another 1,7 million peasant owing small plots, insufficient for the entire household subsistence (Gullo, 1950).

The measures of land redistribution did not start only after the Second World war, but much earlier, when, after the unification of Italy, in 1861, but also in 1867, large portions of estates and lands belonging to the church were being expropriated. In 1917, *Opera Nazionale Combattenti* was created – an institution meant to organize the redistribution of land from large estates to landless war veterans, but only 40.000 ha were redistributed (Prinzi, 1956). In 1946, after the war, with the passing of the new constitution, the discussion about land equality and land ownership came up again on the public agenda.

There were two articles in the constitution that are of particular interest for the matter, articles 42 and 44, both emphasising “the social role of agriculture and land ownership; and the establishment (through art. 44) that agricultural contracts had to be fair” (Percoco, 2017: 4). This will become the constitutional framework that will warrant such reforms, added also to the provision of the first article of the Italian Constitution from 1946, which stated that the Italian Republic is based on the right to labor, such as all citizens should have to possibility of working and living under modern and dignified conditions.

A second issue speeded up the urgency of land reform matter, the reigniting, after the Second World War, of the debate around the *Questione Meridionale* - the problem of the structural poverty, backwardness, widespread unemployment and economic and industrial underdevelopment of the Italian South in relation to the North. Together, these circumstances became the prime causes for what was dubbed “the massive wave of emigration for the Mezzogiorno” (Mack Smith, 1997: 585), when over 5 million Italian southerners migrated in the 50's and 60's towards the Americas, Europe and Northern Italy. The exploitation of the Southern peasants by large landowners was endemic and burdensome. Regarding the Meridional issue and the exploitation of the peasants and the function it serves in the larger framework of the Italian capitalism, a few Gramscian lines, worth quoting at length, describe the conservative elite political consensus, rooted outside of Southern Italy, whose economic and political interests depended on the maintaining of the socioeconomic underdevelopment of Southern Italy. Moreover, the Gramscian position also sheds light on the position and power of agrarian and industrial elites towards improvements of the Southern agriculture, merely relegated to a subordinate position towards the fast-developing Northern industrial and agrarian capitalism.

The Italian peasant is tied to the great landowner. This type of organisation is the most common one in Mezzogiorno and Sicily. This creates a monstrous agrarian blockade that functions as an intermediary and supervisor of and for the Central (Italian) capitalism and the big banks. Its only purpose is to conserve the status quo. In its interior there is no intellectual light, no programme, no push for emancipation and progress. If some ideas or programmes have been presented, they originated outside of the Mezzogiorno, namely from the political groups of conservative agrarians, mostly from Tuscany, that in the Parliament were allies of the conservatives of the agrarian meridional group. (Gramsci, 1926/published 1991: 34)

Corroborating Gramsci's dire perspective about the condition of Southern peasants and the underdeveloped stage of Southern agriculture, Bandini (1955) also drew attention to the lack of innovation in Southern agriculture of

technology and mode of cultivation. The nature of social relations between landlord and peasant was pre-modern, anchored in feudal relations of production, “farm laborers, although by law free and emancipated, were in fact still in a state of economic subjection” (Bandini, 1955: 1), with “distinct forms of landlord domination and different state politics leverages of agrarian capitalists and latifundists” (Elazar, 1996: 233). In Mezzogiorno, a form of almost complete insulation from the State and popular politics of Southern labouring masses was pervasive. The absence of the State empowered landed elites, while rendering “servile the peasant population’ that lived in ‘conditions of absolute economic and personal subjugation” (Elazar, 1996: 233, 244).

The discussion of land reform in relation to the structural issues of the Mezzogiorno can be framed as a constitutive and structurally embedded dualism of the Italian agriculture before 1950. This structural dualism refers also to the uneven distribution of land into a majority of small farms, a minority of large farms, and a consequent relative absence of middle sized farms:

Farms of 20 hectares or less constitute 92,2% of all farms, but occupy only 37% of all land; large farms (larger than 50 hectares), in contrast, represent only 1,2% of all farms, but occupy almost half of all agricultural land in the country (Bonanno, 1989: 91).

Regionally, this dualism meant a high concentration of small and unproductive farms in the South, while larger and more productive farms were located in the North. Middle-size productive and efficient farms seem to be wide-spread in the central regions of Italy. Over time, even with the land reforms, unfortunately, this dualism will only augment in text context of the integration of Italian agricultural production in the global chains of production and distribution, and the subsequent support of the European Community for productive and technologically innovative middle-sized and large farms. However, it is undeniable that even before the reform, there was an “unstoppable decline of great southern estates” (Barone, 1984: 335-336), and thus a State-sponsored program for the “improvement of underdeveloped areas” (Barone, 1986: 45) was justified both in social, but mostly economic terms.

Of course, such dire socioeconomic conditions in the South were prone to be the breeding grounds for various waves of social unrest. The period between 1948 and 1951 was marred by land occupations, social unrest and violent clashes between peasants, backed by the PCI, and large landowners, backed by the police and other elements of control of the repressive State apparatus. As land inequality was particularly high in the South, Mezzogiorno witnessed frequent violent riots and actions of land occupation since the

unification of Italy in 1861, the massacre from the Melissa village being a case in point for the violent repression of collective land-occupation attempted by peasants. The change introduced in his social trend of unrest by the Communist Party was the endowment of these collective, spontaneous acts of social unrest with an organized and coordinated aspect. The turning point from uncoordinated to party-led social action took place around 1943-44, when also leftist workers' unions began supporting peasants' riots (Tarrow, 1981).

There is a clear correlation (Percoco, 2019: 12), backed by empirical research, between the frequency and apparition of 'land invasions' in regions, towns and villages where PCI was stronger, the fight against land inequality becoming in these particular instances instrumental for political consensus consolidation. Moreover, empirical research backed also the hypothesis that "land reform was more intense where land invasions took place" (Percoco, 2019: 15). The involvement of Communist ideology in the struggle for land, we argue, has represented a notable mutation, because of the danger such ideology represented for conservative elites in both South and North, industrial capitalists in the North and the rule of the DC Party. In this sense, the creation of a strong rural entrepreneurial class of (small) proprietors became a political stake for the DC, hoping that such a class would form a "anti-communist social barrier" (Cottam, Brand and Sullam, 1940). However, the dissemination of communist ideology in the South would also erode the pervading Italian culture of *family amoralism* (Ginsborg, 1990), creating a class unity of struggle between the units of family, community and collectively aiming for a more equal and just cartography of property relations, land ownership and productive relations quilting the three elements together:

Communism was an especially dangerous form of mysticism, it was to be applied to existing property relations; an extraordinary and exalted *fede publica* (Ginsborg, 1990:126).

In this context, the DC party decided to pursue a politics of land redistribution, carefully treading such as not to completely alienate the support of local large landowners' class, well represented in the DC's management structures, where said class tried to resist the infringement rights of their property. On the other hand, the DC fought to gain the support of the peasants, while pulling them away from concentrating and organizing around the PCI. Basically, DC opted for an apparent "extension of the (political) franchise" (Acemoglu, 2001), a quite typical elite response to social unrest.

Some aspects become illuminated by this bundle of circumstances: that the reform was taken in a highly volatile political *millieu*, with social uprisings threatening the post-war republican victory of the DC - a party sympathetic and dependent on the landed elites' votes; and that redistribution was only secondarily a process aimed at the betterment of the peasants' life conditions, being primarily an elaborated process of social transformation, state-led, of converting, on the medium and long run, the feudal class of large landowners into a more suited, for the Italian economic path of capitalist development, class of landed entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. Moreover, as was already noted at that time, the restructuring of Italian Southern agriculture on capitalist basis will prove favourable and will be conjoined with the development of a capitalist landed bourgeoisie, a process that, in time, will have widened even more the socioeconomic wealth gap between peasants and other types of land workers and large land proprietors and capitalist farmers, whilst strengthening the DC rule, politically hegemonic for almost 5 decades.

Finally, we can state that the reasons behind the implementation of land reform can be classified into three large categories: economic, social and political (Bandini, 1955). From an economic point of view, the question of the system of land ownership was the most striking, because the large estates were mostly owned by absentee landowners³, who had no intention of improving the land and the manner in which it was cultivated, and this in turn led to stagnant or even decreasing rates of land and agriculture productivity. From a social point of view, the question of high level of poverty and unemployment among landless and poor rural workers ranks as first. The lack of stable life and work conditions for rural workers in turn affects the rates of labour productivity, a factor that weighs in negatively on the entire Italian economy. The need to assure continuous work, places of residence and sources of sustenance for the peasants brings us to the political reasons behind the land

³ The classical description of absentee landlords, and the most suited one for the purposes of this article, is the one that links the feudal system of production with the practice of estate management in the conditions of landlord's absence: "the absentee landlord is a wealthy landowner who always lives from his holdings and know nobody except his ignorant and unreliable administrator. In fact, almost all wealthy latifundists do not know their properties, preferring the great cities where they enjoy their rents in idleness and pleasure" (Snowden, 1986: 14). In this context, of feudal labour brokerage, the labourer lived in a sort of agro-city dwelling, mediating his contact with the landowner being the 'gabolettos', intermediaries working for the landowner, de facto in charge of the labor process. Apparently, the rural worker was cut off of both the State and popular leftist representation, the official presence of the Communist party in the South being rather scarce, such as a state of 'relative isolation from national politics' (Elazar, 1996: 244) ensued, exogenously increasing the dependence relations between peasant and landlord.

reform, namely, the constant fears of the dominant classes of social unrest and protests that had the potential to disrupt the political consensus built around the DC government.

Concluding, the restructuring of Italian economy and agriculture in the period following the Second World War, was evident not only looking at the Land Reform, but also at the cohort of measures and agreements signed by the Italian state, as a part of a larger socioeconomic process of capitalist restructuring. We will give here only a few examples, such as the malaria eradication program (1947-1951), the Marshall Plan (1948-1951), the creation of the Cassa del Mezzogiorno (1950-1984), the Home Plan (1949-1963), the signing of the General Agreement on tariffs and Trade (1950), joining of the European Coal and Steel Community (1951) (enumeration compiled by Caprettini et al, 2019:14). Moreover, there is a modern capitalistic tendency at play also, behind the implementation of the land reform, namely the splitting of landed property such as “to do away with the restrictions that hinder its transfer” (Bandini, 1955:1) and the emancipation of feudal relations from production of rural labourers under conditions of capitalist relations of production.

Land reform and the class (trans)formations. Proprietors and prisoners of property

Usually the assessment of land reforms takes into consideration the correlated action of three factors: “whether the system was a landlord estate or a hacienda system, whether it was gradualist with compensation or took place all at once, whether the it took place in a market or socialist economy” (Binswanger et al, 1995: 2685). In the case of Italy, we are dealing with the redistribution of landlord estates (*demesne*/large lands in repose, owned by absentee landowners), a gradualist, albeit quite fast, redistribution in terms of compensation, that took place in a market economy. The reform aimed the modernization, in capitalist terms (higher productivity of land and labour, higher product output, technological innovation, and capitalist relations of production geared for profit accumulation and surplus-value extraction), of Italian agriculture from the model of extensive farming to that of intensive farming.

Regarding the impact and the success of the land reform, one of the first major impact was the substantial reduction of the surface of the land in repose in relation to all cultivable Italian land to a significant degree, already to 8,2% in 1958, a figure down to 4,1% in 1956:

Lands that have yielded, in the hands of the owners of latifundia, a mean gross marketable product certainly much below 71.000 lire per hectare in 1953, in the hands of the new cultivators rose to 95.000 lire in 1956 and 115.000 lire in 1958. (Sereni, 1997: 351).

However, the success of the agrarian measures was initially overestimated. In 1950, the authors of the reform predicted that it would lead to an increase of 90 million workdays per year in employment, but the real effect was lesser, amounting to a “total increase of 23 million workdays per year” (King, 1970: 7). The underwhelming economic impact of the land reform has been noted also by other authors (De Leo, 2008; Percoco, 2010), both arguing that from a qualitative perspective, reform was only ‘mildly effective’ in triggering development in the treated areas. However, some positive impacts are to be noted as a direct result of the reduction of the number of large estates and a weakening of the sociopolitical power of the elite incumbent in these estates. Firstly, on the short term, an increase in wages was observed as a result of the reduction of the monopsonist power of the landed elites, and this in turn triggered an increase of the living standards of households, with positive spill-over effects upon the level of education and level of private entrepreneurship. Second, “the policy was accompanied with a credit line characterized by low interest rates” (Percoco, 2017: 11) and a subsequent reduction of credit market imperfections.

Aside from these reports of (in)adequacy of the reform, other substantial critiques of the real impact of the reform were formulated almost immediately regarding the loopholes in the law. Prevailing themselves of the ‘unimproved’ clause in the Laws, and trying to avoid expropriation, many landowners argued that they have in fact improved the land, in some cases the law permitting even the construction of a rudimentary shed to count as improvement. Secondly, many landowners have divided their estates among family members, such as to go around the clause of the 300 acres. When this was not possible, the landowners allowed for the expropriation of a poor quality land, such as at the end, for example, the Sicilian case where out of “74.290 hectares distributed, 95% was classified as inferior and marginal, while only 0,4% well-irrigated” (Ginsborg, 1990: 132). Another negative consequence of the land reform was the rise of land price, this action being triggered by the land put on the market for selling, by the latifundists themselves, even before the implementation of the reform, Southern landowners speculating financially in their favour “the land hunger of peasants” (Sereni, 1961: 354).

Furthermore, after the laws passed, the nascent bourgeoisie of capitalist farmer-tenants (selected from the ranks of the *gabolettos*, state functionaries, mobsters, medium size entrepreneurs, etc...), owing already some capital,

immediately bought this land, of a superior quality than the one redistributed, this action leading to the creation of a new landed Southern bourgeoisie, another unmatched economic competitor for the poor rural masses. Other Southern and Northern industrialist also speculated on the reform, buying property with the profits extracted in Northern industry, adding to the ranks and files of various elite groups that together profited from the "systematic pillaging of the agriculture" (Sereni, 1961: 357).

Then, the credit lines, initially favourable to peasants, and the only viable solution for the landless and rural poor, started malfunctioning, while other "reform centres became the target of repeated blows" (Sereni, 1961: 353) weakening further the economic frailty of new small farms and proprietors. Basically, the State lifted its protection of vulnerable economic actors, already indebted and struggling to make the monthly payments:

Many peasants did not make the regular payments, and the board's services were regarded as a form of welfare hand-out. However, in the agriculture year of 1957-58, a sudden change of policy took place. Credit was offered on a much harsher terms and all those who were in debt with the board were refused further concessions. (Ginsborg, 1990: 135)

There was at work what we call a process of socioeconomic and political reversion, from the progressive feature imposed by the struggle of the peasants for land that pressured the government into passing the land reform to a subsequent prevailing influence of "agents of capitalist restoration and monopolistic expansion" (Sereni, 1997: 353). This phenomenon spelled the "subordination of agriculture to the new superpowers of industrial, commercial, and financial monopolists" (Sereni, 1997: 356) and the definitive exclusion of many new small proprietors from profitable agricultural production altogether. It was, in fact, a sort of state-sponsored capitalist monopoly, given that the resources and the levers of power were handed to hegemonic landed classes by their representative political elite, the 'dominant and clerical' DC party and its acolytes. The war against the newly formed class of peasants-land proprietors was waged through the imposition of a sole criteria for warranting public and private investment, namely profit and productivity, two accounts on which the new rural working class was failing, due to economic and social vulnerability, such as "only a small portion of the farms created by the land reform remained in business for an extended period of time" (Bonanno, 1989: 95). In short, the transfer of property through redistribution also led to the enshrinement of property augmentation capitalist clauses, such as profitability, productivity and amelioration standards impossible to meet by the small and struggling new

proprietors, whom inadvertently became prisoners in and of the new relations of property, such as they previously were prisoners of seigneurial relations of productions.

The expropriated landowners' fate was much better: first they received a higher value in money from the expropriation of their lands than the real value of those lands; second, some landowners improved technologically their farms with the help of the reform itself (one of the provisions of article 10 of the Stralcio Law); thirdly, some of them divested money from agriculture and land toward the booming real-estate and construction industry, thus converting themselves into industrialists or urban entrepreneurs, in short, transforming themselves into (industrial) capitalists. It is a situation mirroring inversely the one of the poor rural laborers: the latifundists, through the reconfiguration of the form of property and a property transfer mechanism that ultimately worked in their favour, were liberated from the property prison that used to be their vast lands in repose, rendering almost no profits and anchoring them in outdated relations of production. The new form of capitalist property and new capitalist social relations made property ownership work again in the favour of old rural hegemony, turned into entrepreneurs of modernisation virtually overnight, while the clouds of social unrest dissipated at the horizon.

Furthermore, again on the side of the peasants, the defeats were multiple and on different fronts: the peasant movement was weakened and the small farms created proved inefficient, thus they could not become instruments of economic growth or accumulation of capital for their new owners. New small farms "were isolated in the market with inadequate supporting infrastructures" (Bonanno, 1988:141) and they did not survive enough to shape the (productive) agricultural landscape on the long term in their favour.

Aside from this process of class reconfiguration and the transformation of property relations, from a macro point of view, the Italian agriculture, after the land reform, has also undergone a process of decrease, especially in the South, in the two decades following the reform, in terms of farm number (from 4,2 million to 3,6 million), reduction of productive land (3,5 million hectares), "a decrease in the agricultural portion of the GNP from 23% in 1961 to 9% in 1971" (Bonanno, 1989:96) and a reduction of the rural workforce by 2 million spanning over the 1960's, with no regional industrial infrastructure capable of absorbing this living labour surplus. Unfortunately, this situation had only augmented further the circumstances of Italian dualism, large farms growing steady in numbers, while small and medium farms decreased, symptom of capitalist concentration and accumulation of both capital and property in the hands of capitalist dominant classes.

Conclusions

In our article we have tried to offer a comprehensive tableau of the circumstances surrounding the Italian Land Reform of 1950, looking at structural, historical, socioeconomic and political aspects, discussing each from the perspective of its relevance in terms of the transformation of relations of property and production in the South, in the aftermath of the reform. We also discussed the class process that ensued after the reform, displaying a particular interest in retracing the conditions of the transformation of the class of absentee lords (a pre-capitalist formation) into an entrepreneurial class, while on the side of the rural working class, on the medium and long term, the tendencies of proletarianization and pauperization prevailed, as the condition of structural dualism and economic underdevelopment persisted over time.

Moreover, from the loopholes of the laws to the support on medium and long term granted to the class of Southern large landowners, the Italian State revealed its class allegiances, while using land-transfer as a mechanism for controlling rural social unrest rooted in the discontents over land ownership. Although initially the ruling Christian-Democrat political elite opted for an 'extension of the franchise' through land redistribution from absentee landlords to poor or landless peasants, on the medium and long term it became impossible for small farmers and proprietors to compete on the market, falling both in terms of productivity and profitability, such as their new acquired landed property did not turn into an economic entrepreneurship, nor did it offer a reliable source for household subsistence. As the project of Southern Italian agricultural modernisation seemed to have been successful only partially, with the creation of few productive and profitable large farms, the capitalist transformation of property and social relations was achieved. Most feudal hegemons became agrarian capitalists, venture capitalists, capitalist rentiers, real estate magnates, owners of industry, etc.

Looking at the consequences of the land reform, we can say that indeed, on the medium and long term, it has benefited the latifundists, while also converting them into a class more suited for the requirements of Italian capitalist economy. Our conclusion formulated on the basis of the literature survey on the impact of Italian Land Reform is supported also by Bonanno, who makes a similar argument, arguing that the land reform served primarily the economic interests of the bourgeoisie rather than those of rural laborers. Moreover, the dissolution of traditional property forms and their replacement with capitalist forms of property served the purpose of "accelerating the process of transformation of the absentee lords from a pre-capitalist group into an entrepreneurial class" (Bonanno, 1988:143).

Our argument complements Bonanno's findings through a closer look at the nexus property-social relations, describing how in the logic of capitalist property forms and the corresponding social relations of production, such process of class reconfigurations described by Bonanno are made possible, while State class allegiances are rendered even more visible and explicable, both in terms of intra-class elite frictions and alliances, but also of inter-class conflicts articulated politically as the confrontation between DC and PCI. Moreover, the entire process of Italian post-war capitalist modernisation of agriculture was bound to reproduce the constitutive social class conflict between proprietors of land and capital and (rural) workers, the latter temporarily empowered by a transfer of land in their ownership, but debilitated over time by the capitalist alliance between politics and economy.

REFERENCES

- Acemoglu, D; Robinson J.A. (2001), A Theory of Political Transitions, *American Economic Review*, 91(4), pp. 938-963.
- Acemoglu, D; Robinson J.A. (2006), *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006
- Bandini, M. (1955), Land Reform in Italy, in *International Journal of Agrarian Affairs*, International Association of Agrarian Economists, vol. 2(1), pp. 1-14.
- Barone, G. (1984), Stato e Mezzogiorno (1943-1960) - Il primo tempo dell'intervento straordinario, in *La costruzione della democrazia*, vol. I of *Storia dell'Italia Repubblicana*, (ed.) Francesco Barbagallo. Turin: Einaudi, pp. 293-409.
- Barone, G. (1986), *Mezzogiorno e modernizzazione. Eletticità, irrigazione e bonifica nell'Italia contemporanea*. Turin: Einaudi 1986.
- Berardi, E. (2006), *La riforma agraria in Italia e gli Stati Uniti*. Bologna: Il Mulino 2006.
- Binswanger, Hans P., Deininger, K., Feder, G. (1995), Power, Distortions and Reform in Agricultural Land Relations, in *Handbook of Development Economics*, Vol. 3, part B, Behrman, J and Srinivasan, T.N. (Eds.), Elsevier Science B.V., pp. 2659 – 2772.
- Bonanno, A (1988), Theories of the State: The Case of land Reform in Italy, 1944-1961, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 29(1), pp. 131-147.
- Bonanno, A. (1989), Agriculture and Dualistic Development: The Case of Italy, *Agri Hum Values*, vol. 6, pp. 91-10.
- Boserup, E (1965), *Conditions of Agricultural Growth*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Caprettini, B, Casaburi, L, Venturini, M. (2019), The Electoral Impact of Wealth Redistribution: Evidence from the Italian Land Reform, Research paper.
- Elazar, D.S. (1996), Agrarian Relations and Class Hegemony: A Comparative Analysis of Landlord Social and Political Power in Italy 1861-1920, in *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 47, no.2/June 1996.

- Galli, G (1993), *Storia della DC 1943-1993: mezzo secolo della Democrazia cristiana*. Milano: Kaos.
- Ginsborg, P. (1990), *A History of Contemporary Italy. Society and Politics 1943-1988*. London: Penguin.
- Gramsci, A. (1991), *La questione meridionale*. Roma: Editore Riuniti.
- Gullo, F. (1950), *Address to the Italian Chamber of Deputies*, 1950.07.21.
- King, R. (1973), *Land reform. The Italian experience*. London: Butterworths.
- De Leo, R. (2008), *Riforma agraria e politiche di sviluppo. L'esperienza in Puglia, Lucania e Molise (1951-1976)*. Matera: Anteazza.
- Mack Smith, D. (1997), *Storia d'Italia dal 1861 al 1997*. Roma: Laterza 1997.
- Marciani, G.E. (1966), *L'esperienza di Riforma Agraria in Italia*, Roma: Giuffrè Editore.
- Martinelli P. (2012), Latifundia Revisited. Market Power, Land Inequality and Efficiency in Interwar Italian Agriculture, *EHES Working Paper in Economic History*, no.20/July 2012., pp. 1-59.
- Percoco, M. (2010), *Policloro: da villaggio di bonifica a centro ordinatore del Metapontino*, Potenza: Consiglio Regionale della Basilicata.
- Percoco, M. (2017), Wealth Inequality, Redistribution and Local Development. The Case of Land Reform in Italy, in *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 0(0) 1-20, DOI: 10.1177/2399654417691282.
- Percoco, M. (2019), Land Invasions and Land Reform in Basilicata. Italy: An Evaluation of Place-Based Policies, in *Territory, Politics, Governance*, DOI: 10.1080/2162671.2019.167.6822.
- Prinzi, D. (1956), *La riforma agraria in Puglia, Lucania e Molise nei primi cinque anni*, Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Russo, G (1955), *Baroni e contadini*, Milano:Universale Laterz
- Sereni, E. (1997), *The Agricultural Landscape of Contemporary Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Snowden F.M. (1986), *Violence and Great Estates in the South of Italy: Apulia, 1900-1922*. Cambridge:Cambridge 1986.
- Tarrow, S. (1981), Partito Comunista e contadini nel Mezzogiorno, in Villani, P and Marrone, N. (Eds.), *Riforma agraria e questione meridionale, Antologia critica 1943-1980*. Bari: De Donato Editore, pp. 115-143.

