

Conclusion: A Comparison with the Agrarian Policy of Fascist Italy

To conclude this study I shall briefly examine, at least in general terms, the problems involved in comparing the agrarian policy implemented by the Third Reich up to the outbreak of war with that of the Fascist regime in Italy. Only very sporadically has the general theoretical debate on 'Fascism' touched on concrete comparisons between various sectors of the economy, thus leaving aside abstract discussions or questions of principle as to whether or not, between the wars, Fascism existed as an international phenomenon present throughout Europe. Even specific comparisons have largely dealt with problems such as the roles and personalities of the two dictators, the form of the party in the regime, foreign policy, and the general ideological premises. There have been almost no comparative studies, however, on socio-economic aspects and the respective economic policies.

As far as the specific subject of agrarian policy is concerned, most experts have tackled the problem by dealing only with national history, thus excluding a priori the possibility of finding international parallels. Other studies have considered the common features in agrarian policies in industrial countries faced with the economic and specifically agrarian crisis that took place on a world-wide scale between the two wars. From this point of view what has been studied is the whole range of interventionist and control-type policies for marketing and production, introduced by all the large industrial countries to defend agriculture. It goes without saying that in these kinds of approach, the problematics of Fascism are of only background interest.

In these brief concluding comments I certainly do not intend to give a definitive answer to the question of whether or not we can talk about a common Fascist agrarian policy. I simply wish to present some interesting data and make some introductory observations on this subject: the implicit aim will thus be to trace a route, often indicated but seldom taken, in the field of historical comparison.

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We may begin with a number of considerations concerning the structure of the agricultural sectors in Germany and Italy on the eve of the period examined in this study. From a summary analysis of the statistical data, it is clear that there were a number of deep differences concerning the importance of agriculture in the economic and social systems of the two countries. In the period between the wars, despite the fact that more than 30 per cent of the German population was still engaged in agriculture, there can be no doubt that, from the economic and employment point of view, it was less important in Germany than in Italy. This difference leads to the conclusion that, whereas in Italy agriculture was still by far the dominant sector between the wars, in Germany its importance was marginal to the workings of an industrial economy that for some time had dominated at a European level. One need only bear in mind that in 1925 German agriculture employed 30 per cent of the workforce to produce just 16 per cent of the national product, whereas in Italy the share of the national product was 25 per cent right up to the outbreak of war.¹ Since the turn of the century German agriculture had been relegated to a secondary economic role (subsequently accentuated by the disappointments of the First World War) and all the internal weaknesses of the sector had been exposed when it could not meet domestic requirements. In Italy, on the other hand, agriculture was still by far the most important sector, despite the fact that some areas were undergoing rapid industrialisation. The transition from a predominantly rural economy (and therefore society) to an industrial one took place very quickly in Germany: more or less in the last 30 years of the nineteenth century. And this speed of change had a number of repercussions – as we shall see later – on National Socialist ideology and agrarian policy.

To bring the Italian economy and society up to date, it became imperative for the Fascist regime to modernise agriculture at great speed, whereas Germany felt this pressure less, given that agriculture was more or less of marginal importance to the economy. This first structural difference between the two countries appears so profound that it almost excludes attempts at a comparison from the outset.

As regards the domestic situation of agriculture in the two countries, there were a number of further differences, at least in broad outline (given the difficulties involved in comparing the statistical data). In Germany there was a steady growth in the number of small farmers whose position in the sector improved both qualitatively and quantitatively: it was, in fact, owner-

occupiers, directly farming small to medium-sized units, who dominated the overall scene, although the large-estate owners still had an important position, mainly in the eastern regions. In Italy the internal structure of agriculture was much more fragmented: the proportion of owner-occupiers was certainly much smaller than in Germany, and a distinguishing feature was the pressure on land from families belonging to the 'rural proletariat'. This pressure was so great that agriculture was described by some as the 'sponge-sector',² which soaked up nine and a half million families who had no alternative income. Finally, the role of the southern *latifondisti*, who were mostly absentee landlords fairly disinterested in modernising their huge estates, was completely different from that of the Junkers, who had led the way in the capitalist development of agriculture during the nineteenth century.

But let us now consider a second set of factors concerning the political sphere. In Italy, following a deep political and social crisis, one of whose epicentres was agriculture, the Fascists, while still only a marginal party, rose to power very quickly. The Great War and its social repercussions had triggered off a huge peasant movement, which took at least two different forms: on one hand, the landless pushed to acquire holdings in all Italian regions,³ and on the other, there was growing social conflict in the Po Valley plain between farm workers, organised in socialist leagues, and the large capitalist landowners.

In fact, it was in this area, where big farmers were much more integrated into the capitalist market, that the Fascist Party, made up of students, peasants and members of the urban middle classes, became – as is known – the strong arm of the landowners, engaged in the crucial struggle against unionised farm workers.⁴ Given the very varied and incoherent nature of the Partito Nazionale Fascista in this early stage, it would be a mistake to generalise and claim that Fascism was a politico-military tool in the hands of the Po Valley landowners, who, despite their own efforts, had not been able to organise their political presence well enough until then.⁵ On the other hand, there can be no doubt that the alliance between the landowners and the *fasci* was an important component in the social bloc which opened the way to success for Mussolini's young, dynamic party. Another component in this social bloc in favour of an authoritarian way out of the serious post-war crisis, was made up of the southern *latifondisti*, whose economic interests were very different from those of their Po Valley counterparts.⁶ Whatever the case may be, it may be said that the rise to power of Mussolini's party in 1922 was basically due to the desire of the ruling circles in

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liberal Italy, including both industrialists and agriculturists, to end the post-war crisis. The old ruling class was convinced that, when all had been set right, it would not be difficult to get rid of Mussolini in due time. As is known, this did not prove so easy. But unlike the National Socialists, and despite the much longer period of time available to him, Mussolini had to reckon with the pre-Fascist ruling class right up to the end.

The situation in Germany was very different. The old Third Internationalist theories that Hitler's NSDAP was merely the strong arm of the traditional ruling groups has long been disproved. Certainly, especially in the last phase of the Republican crisis, Hitler received the firm (and some would say decisive) support of influential industrial, agrarian and financial circles. But it would be wrong to over-emphasise this aspect. On the contrary, it must be pointed out that during free elections almost a third of the German people voted for Hitler's party. Mussolini started off from a position of weakness within the ruling élite and did not have a base of mass support, whereas the huge mass following which Hitler had managed to win over, above all during the years of the great depression, was of crucial importance.

This radical difference is clearly reflected in the agrarian policies of the respective regimes: the Italian one had to 'report back' to the ruling circles which had supported it in its rise to power, whereas the German policy also had to meet demands coming from lower down in rural society.

The ideological aspects must also be taken into account. At first sight both regimes shared a 'ruralist' ideology, which exalted the health of the rural world from various points of view, and called for it to be strengthened in the face of encroaching industrialisation and urbanisation. This ruralist ideology strongly influenced agrarian policy. But on examining the inherent components and models, we soon see that there are deep differences. In Germany, following the very rapid and deep transformations caused by the process of industrial growth in the late nineteenth century, a reaction had been building up in large sections of society, especially among the middle classes. They looked on these transformations negatively and longed to stop, or even turn back, 'the clock of history'. The *Blut und Boden* ideology, the basis at least from the programmatic point of view of the Third Reich's agrarian policy, grew out of this extreme anti-industrial reaction. Behind Darré's ruralism, and its prevalently racial basis, was the complete conviction that the peasants could once more play the important role that they had in the past. It assessed the contribution of various social groups not on

the basis of economic values but on the grounds of their respective 'racial quality'.

In Italy, however, the anti-industrial and ruralist tendency never took on similar proportions.⁷ On the contrary, especially around the turn of the century, a productivist ideology, advocating modernisation, had taken root among the middle classes. And Mussolini's anti-urbanism had no racial overtones. He considered ruralism to be a kind of myth of a golden age, to be set beside other unattainable goals. Politically, he wished to strengthen the peasant element by incorporating it into Italian society, from which it had always been excluded, to make it the stabilising force in providing consensus for the regime. Mussolini was less concerned with the idea that, from the demographic point of view, country dwellers were more prolific, and therefore should be strengthened as they had a considerable role to play in a state aiming to become a great power through the sheer number of its population. I believe that interest in this demographic aspect, although fairly important, soon faded – as is demonstrated by the little interest shown by the regime in implementing its own laws to prevent the flight of country dwellers towards the cities.⁸ In Mussolini's ideology there was a significant emphasis on modernisation, and this comes through in his early programmes for agrarian democracy: 'The land to those who work it and make it bear fruit.'⁹ This aspect becomes even more important when we consider that a large number of technocrats, economists, agronomists and leading Italian intellectuals were called in to help with projects for the transformation of Italian agriculture. Mention need only be made of Arrigo Serpieri, a Professor of Agronomy, who on several occasions was given important government appointments, and who long enjoyed the Duce's support. A comparison with what was going on in Germany at the same time is particularly instructive: the National Socialists received no support from technocrats in the sector (cf. the case of Max Sering), nor did they appoint members of academic groups to important positions.

From the aspects dealt with so far, and from specific differences, the highly differentiated characters of the respective agrarian policies emerge: in Germany – as we have seen in this book – an agrarian policy was implemented according to precise ideological premises, especially that of strengthening the *Bauerntum* and freeing it from the logic of the capitalist market, both at home and abroad. At the same time, however, the National Socialist agrarian policy became increasingly marginal compared to other priorities, such as accelerated re-armament. The tensions and contradictions which

could have seriously undermined the rural population's electoral support for the regime were avoided or attenuated due to the – in my opinion – decisive reliance on food resources available elsewhere and in particular in the Danube–Balkan area. Thanks to a dense network of trade and political relations based on the complementary nature of the economies, the regime managed to import low-cost foodstuffs to meet the growing demands of consumption levels at home, thus maintaining 'intact' the protected sphere of the *Bauerntum*.

The Fascist regime's agrarian policy took a different course: it was definitely more inclined to encourage modernisation, even if there is no real confirmation of it from the results. I do not wish to enter into the details of the debate on the more or less modern nature of the Fascist regime and its policy,¹⁰ especially since recent studies have led to the facile contrast between the two extreme theories being outmoded.¹¹ I would, however, like to point out that in some important areas the regime's agrarian policies did have a certain leitmotif of modernisation and rationalisation. I am referring above all to the land-reclamation schemes, which made provisions for deep transformations in Italian agriculture, not only in terms of land ownership but also in productive and social terms. As is known, the dream of Italian technocracy gathered round the idea of 'complete reclamation' and in a couple of phases (1928–9 and 1934–5) they also seemed to win the favour of the Duce. The resources invested in land-reclamation schemes were quite considerable when viewed from the point of view of the structural weaknesses of the Italian economy. But the concrete results never came anywhere near the extravagant promises. A decisive influence in slowing down the reclamation schemes was the opposition of *latifondisti* who – despite Serpieri's efforts to stress the inviolability of their rights – feared that any state intervention would undermine their hegemony.¹²

This should not lead us to undervalue the importance of the project, especially since recent studies have emphasised the considerable interest in the subject shown by important industrial groups, primarily electric companies. They saw scope in these schemes for building up a complete agro-industrial cycle, based on modern infrastructure.¹³ The resistance from the ruling classes meant that the plans for complete reclamation largely stayed on the drawing board, and where they were implemented – as in the case of the Pontine Marshes – they were distorted for propaganda and publicity purposes.¹⁴

Another important episode, in which the agrarian policy showed

clear signs of being well disposed to the idea of modernisation, was the *battaglia del grano*.¹⁵ Begun in the summer of 1925 to combat a serious grain shortage, it gave discreet results from the quantitative point of view. The shortage was almost completely made up, thus taking the weight off the Italian balance of payments, and the incentives to increase cereal output encouraged modernisation in the most advanced area of Italian agriculture: the Po Valley. But the *battaglia del grano* also had negative consequences, for it increased the gap between advanced and backward regions. Thus in the Po Valley provinces in 1938, we find 42 per cent of the country's superphosphates, 62 per cent of its tractors and 66.6 per cent of the total grain-silo volume.¹⁶ Furthermore, in a closed economy the concentration on cereal production caused a serious crisis in specialised sectors, primarily in the south, which had been used to making big profits by exporting products like oil, fruit, vegetables, nuts and grapes.¹⁷ Finally, the *battaglia del grano* had a negative impact on consumption in that it contributed to a shortage of proteins and vitamins, providing only starches. On this subject, it should be remembered that the regime, aware of the limited resources available for its ambitious projects, pursued a policy of holding down mass consumption.

A significant example of the difference in respective agrarian policies was the total lack of measures to strengthen the peasantry in Italy: for example, legislation to improve conditions of tenure (along the lines of the *Erbhof*). As is known, many Fascists considered *mezzadria* (métayage) to be the best way of running a farm. Here too we can see just how far the Fascist regime was dependent on the conditions and interests of the agrarian block that brought it to power. But in Germany the difficult conditions, impeding the full implementation of Darré's ideology, arose more from the fact that precedence was given to industry and re-armament.

As far as the two regimes' intervention and market-control policies are concerned, it must be said that they were not all specific to Fascism. Faced with a serious agricultural crisis in the 1920s, almost all industrialised western countries attempted to regulate their domestic markets in some way or other, so that they could control the prices and flows of foodstuffs and protect domestic production from international competition.¹⁸

To sum up the conclusions of this very brief comparison, in Germany, despite mounting pressure on output, the internal imbalances in agriculture could not be altered without incurring a negative reaction from a large slice of the population whose consensus was important for Hitler. But in Italy modernisation could take

place only on a reduced scale, and with the risk of further opening the gap between rich and poor farmers, and this was due to the fact that Mussolini was never strong enough to clash with the interests of the social block which had helped him rise to power. Thus in answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, an initial survey confirms that the features peculiar to each nation (political, economic and structural) mean that there are little grounds for referring to a common agrarian policy specific to Fascism.¹⁹

Notes

1. For the figures for Italy, cf. the statistical appendices in C. Daneo, *Breve storia dell'agricoltura italiana*, Milan, 1980; P. Ercolani, 'Documentazione statistica di base', in G. Fuà (ed.), *Lo sviluppo economico in Italia*, Milan, 1972, vol. II, pp. 410ff.

2. E. Fano, 'Problemi e vicende dell'agricoltura italiana fra le due guerre', *Quaderni storici*, vol. 29/30, 1975, p. 470.

3. Cf. the thorough contemporary study by G. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra: Relazione finale*, Rome, 1938.

4. Cf. P. Corner, *Il fascismo a Ferrara 1919-1925*, Bari, 1974; A. Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites and the Origins of Italian Fascism: The Province of Bologna*, Princeton, 1982.

5. Cf. M. Malatesta, 'La grande depressione e l'organizzazione degli interessi economici: il caso degli agrari padani', *Passato e presente*, vol. 8, 1985.

6. F. De Felice, 'Fascismo e Mezzogiorno', *Annali dell'Istituto A. Cervi*, vol. I, 1979, pp. 33-347; P. Bevilacqua, *Le campagne del Mezzogiorno fra fascismo e dopoguerra: Il caso della Calabria*, Turin, 1980.

7. Cf. some points dealt with in S. Lanaro, *Nazione e lavoro: Saggio sulla cultura borghese in Italia*, Venice, 1979.

8. A. Treves, *Le migrazioni interne nell'Italia fascista*, Turin, 1976.

9. Passage quoted in R. De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, vol. I, *La conquista del potere 1921-1925*, Turin, 1966, p. 75.

10. For the background to the terms of the debate, cf. E. Fano, 'La "Restaurazione antifascista liberista": Ristagno a sviluppo economico durante il fascismo', and R. Sarti, 'La modernizzazione fascista in Italia: conservatrice o rivoluzionaria?', both in A. Acquarone and D. Vernassa (eds.), *Il regime fascista*, Bologna, 1974, pp. 260ff.

11. Cf. the recent definition by T. Mason, 'Moderno, modernità, modernizzazione: un montaggio', *Movimento operaio e socialista*, vol. 10, 1987, pp. 45-62.

12. Cf. the studies by R. Cerri, 'Note sulla bonifica integrale del fascismo', *Italia contemporanea*, vol. 137, 1979; M. Stampacchia, 'Sull'assalto al latifondo siciliano nel 1939-1944', *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, vol. 6, 1978, pp. 586ff.

13. G. Barone, 'Capitale finanziario e bonifica integrale nel Mezzogiorno fra le due guerre', *Italia contemporanea*, vol. 137, 1979, pp. 63ff., and the recent monograph by the same author, *Mezzogiorno e modernizzazione: Elettività, irrigazione e bonifiche*, Turin, 1986.

14. R. Mariani, *Fascismo e 'città nuove'*, Milan, 1976. For a grass-roots study of the conditions of settlers, see O. Gaspari, *L'emigrazione veneta nell'agro pontino durante il periodo fascista*, Brescia, 1986.

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15. A. Staderini, 'La politica cerealicola del regime: l'impostazione della battaglia del grano', *Storia contemporanea*, vol. 9, 1976; G. Tattara, 'Cerealicoltura e politica agraria durante il fascismo', in G. Toniolo (ed.), *L'economia italiana 1961-1940*, Bari-Rome, 1978, pp. 373ff.

16. See the studies in D. Preti et al., *Le campagne emiliane durante il periodo fascista*, Bologna, 1982.

17. For an introduction to the background of the problem, cf. D. Preti, 'Per una storia agraria e del malessere agrario nell'Italia fascista', in Preti et al., *Le campagne emiliane*, pp. 51ff.

18. Cf. H. J. Puhle, 'Aspekte der Agrarpolitik im "Organisierten Kapitalismus"', in H. U. Wehler (ed.), *Sozialgeschichte heute*, Göttingen, 1974, pp. 543ff.; M. Tracy, *Agriculture in Western Europe: Crisis and Adaption*, London, 1964.

19. For a more detailed comparative analysis accompanied by statistical data, see G. Corni, 'Die Agrarpolitik des Faschismus: ein Vergleich zwischen Deutschland und Italien', *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für Deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 17, 1988, pp. 391-423.