

INTRODUCTION

The central Italian region of Tuscany played a major role in the rise of fascism to power. In the years leading to the March on Rome, only Emilia surpassed it in the number of fascist members and branches. Tuscan fascism, moreover, was second to none in its violence, organizational strength, and intransigence. Far from depending on outside support, Tuscan fascists undertook the export of squadristism to neighbouring Lazio and Umbria, even to distant Apulia.

Despite its prominent role in Mussolini's 'revolution', however, Tuscan fascism has been largely neglected by historians. The historiography of the postwar crisis and the rise of fascism has suffered from a pronounced northern bias. The experience of regions to the north of the Apennines has attracted a disproportionate scholarly interest, with an outpouring of excellent monographs on Emilia and the Po Valley. The same seminal period in the history of central and southern Italy has been underdeveloped. There is no extended study of the 'Red Years' and the rise of fascism in Tuscany. There are local studies of particular cities and provinces, but no attempt to explain the features that make the region as a whole a fruitful and substantial case study. This book is an effort to fill a large gap in the literature.

In addition to its importance as a region where fascism exploded in its most extreme and violent form, Tuscany has other claims upon the attention of the historian. The first of these is the unusual opportunity it provides of examining all of the chief components of fascist support within a single region. Other zones of fascist strength were overwhelmingly either agricultural or industrial. Tuscany is unique among Italian regions in offering the chance of confronting both agrarian and industrial fascism in their most powerful forms.

Tuscany was above all a major agricultural region. Rural Tuscany was dominated by the institution of sharecropping known as *mezzadria*. *Mezzadria* held undisputed sway in the countryside of the provinces of

Arezzo, Florence, Pisa, and Siena, and here especially squadristism flourished. The region was also, however, one of the foremost industrial zones in the nation. Livorno, Grosseto, Florence, and Massa-Carrara provinces were the sites of some of the leading Italian companies in such sectors as mining, textiles, steel, chemicals, shipbuilding, and marble quarrying. Tuscan big business, moreover, was unusual in the depth and enthusiasm of its involvement in reactionary extremism. An important task is to explore the profitability constraints and political calculations that informed the pro-fascism of so many industrialists in the region. Finally, the regional metropolis at Florence and the provincial capitals were major commercial and retailing centres, and this fact poses the question of the role of the petty-bourgeoisie in fascism.

Who then supported fascism in town and countryside, and why? To what extent did Tuscany conform to national patterns? What are the implications of the pattern of support for fascism in this important case for the wider interpretation of the movement? The attempt to answer these questions with regard to each of the major groups in Tuscan society has determined the structure of the book, which is organized thematically. Part I deals with agrarian fascism, turning first to the nobility and then to peasants and farm workers. Part II examines industrial and urban Tuscany, beginning with big business and then moving to the mass popular support for fascism, particularly within the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie. Fascism, however, could never have won power if it had relied solely on the strength of its membership. What enabled Mussolini's movement to win the civil war with the left so rapidly, to deploy a private paramilitary force with near impunity, and then to stage a successful March on Rome was the extensive collusion of the state apparatus throughout the region. Part III, therefore, explores the relations between the blackshirts and state officials.

Such a thematic approach facilitates the job of weighing the significance of the fascist militancy of particular social groups and classes with regard to some of the major issues of interpretation. Does the Tuscan evidence confirm the view that fascism was a weapon of big business in the defence of Italian capitalism? Was it a product of the extremism of the lower middle classes in a time of world war and social dislocation? Did the movement emerge as a product of modernization and the commercialization of agriculture? Is fascism simply a synonym for counter-revolution and repression? Was squadristism an extension of the divisions and methods of the First World War to domestic politics? Was it a 'parenthesis' in Tuscan history caused by 'accidents' imposed from without, or was it a possibility deeply rooted in the social structures of the region?

The period covered by the book requires some explanation. The chief

sources of Italian fascism lie in the frontal clash between landlords and peasants over the issue of control over the land, the labour market, and local government. In zones apart from Tuscany where fascism became a powerful force – the Po Valley and Apulia – this conflict gathered momentum from the first organized agricultural strikes at the turn of the century to the all-out confrontation of the postwar years. Fascism marked the violent suppression of the contest and the re-imposition of the prerogatives and power of property. To separate the final stage in this process from its long gestation period is to omit the deep, long-term origins of fascism. The struggle for power in the countryside was a continuous contest for the quarter of a century after 1900.

Tuscany, however, had its own very different tempo. There was no history until 1919 of a challenge by the peasantry to the power of the landlords. In the Giolittian era when there was turmoil in the countryside elsewhere in the peninsula, the Tuscan provinces remained untouched by agricultural strikes, land occupations, and the counter measures of landlords. In a sense that was unique in Italy, the history of the contest for power in the countryside of central Italy was confined to the four years 1919–22. This book is a history of the crisis of these years in Tuscan society, from the first mass strikes in 1919 to the end of labour militancy marked by the beginning of the fascist dictatorship. Every conflict, however, has a prehistory, and in the first chapter I attempt to define the long-term processes which silently prepared the post-war explosion.

The concluding date of 1922 has a similar explanation. The March on Rome marked a watershed in Tuscan history with the crushing of the labour movement throughout the region as a mass force for a generation. It is this process which is the subject of this study. I have not attempted to examine the means by which property owners took advantage of the dictatorship to secure their power and to prevent the re-emergence of labour unrest. The years after the seizure of power merit a full-scale investigation in their own right, and I hope to return to the fascist regime in Tuscany in a future work. The question here is not how fascism used its power, but how it gained it. This question too is complex, and the attempt to provide an answer for these eight provinces is the purpose of the pages that follow.

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Excerpt

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PART I



THE COUNTRYSIDE

CHAPTER I

PARTNERSHIP AND LOVE

CLASSICAL SHARECROPPING

The system of sharecropping or *mezzadria* was the dominant institution of the Tuscan countryside, and the vast area where it held sway was the zone where fascism was strongest. There were, however, provinces where sharecropping was not the rule, and these must be mentioned in order to explain the geography of fascism. In the industrial provinces of Massa-Carrara and Livorno, agriculture was poorly developed and was conducted in the main by small proprietors who were never successfully unionized on a large scale. Here agrarian fascism was a negligible force. Lucca and Grosseto provinces, by contrast, possessed important agricultural zones, but they were entirely different both from each other and from the rest of Tuscany. Grosseto province was an area of backward great estates worked by migrant day labourers. In its social and economic structures, therefore, Grosseto was the northernmost extension of southern Italian latifundism rather than a characteristic representative of central Italy. Lucca resembled Grosseto in possessing social structures that were very different from the rest of the region. Lucca, however, stood apart in a very contrasting manner. Grosseto was the realm of latifundia; Lucca was a province of dispersed landownership in which the peasant direct cultivator was the dominant figure.

None of these provinces – Lucca, Grosseto, Livorno, and Massa-Carrara – stood in the storm centre of the conflict between landlord and peasant that produced agrarian fascism in its most powerful and violent form. In the industrial provinces the countryside was calm, and fascism emerged chiefly as an urban movement. The latifundia of the Maremma in Grosseto had instead a turbulent history, but fascism there was slow to evolve, and did so as an importation from Florence rather than an indigenously based phenomenon. Lucca, finally, was *sui generis*, and merits attention, but as a small and atypical zone.

The central focus of our concerns is the four major agricultural provinces of Arezzo, Pisa, Florence, and Siena. These provinces dominated Tuscan farming and played the principal role in the rise of agrarian squadristism. Since *mezzadria* was the backbone of the social structure of these provinces in the centre of Tuscany, and since fascism arose in response to the crisis of the sharecropping system, it is important to begin by examining this key institution of Tuscan society.

Landlord and tenant

Under the traditional pattern of *mezzadria* the property of the landlord was divided into one or more estates. Each estate, or *fattoria*, was considered a single administrative unit and was subdivided into a series of peasant farms, called *poderi*.¹ The *fattoria* was the centre of administrative control, which was the exclusive prerogative of the proprietor; the *poderi* were the units of actual cultivation. The working of the land was governed by contract between the landlord and the peasant tenant (*mezzadro*) under the legal form of a partnership in a joint venture. Put most simply, the lord provided the land, and the *mezzadro* the labour, while the entire produce and the expenses of cultivation were divided equally. The proprietor's share of the crop was either consumed in whole or in part, or sold for profit; the peasant's share was his sole source of subsistence.

Here it is important to observe in greater detail the workings of the system because a whole ideology of lordly inspiration concerning *mezzadria* has been propagated which renders Tuscan history incomprehensible. According to this 'official' view, which dominated the discussions of the Accademia dei Georgofili, the landlords' technical and agronomical society, and became the creed of propertied classes in the region, Tuscany in *mezzadria* had found the solution to the social question. In industry and in the northern countryside where wage labour prevailed, there was continual class conflict, and constant danger to social order. Not so in Tuscany, where peasant and landlord were equal partners united by a common interest in the greatest productivity of the soil. The increase of either party was the benefit of both. Thus Pasquale Villari, exemplifying the 'official' doctrine, wrote,

The contract of *mezzadria*, as has been repeated a thousand times over, has here achieved its best form, and makes the peasant happy, honest, and at ease; it puts him in perfect harmony with the landlord, who has become his partner. This is the true solution to the social question; here socialism has not penetrated, and never will. If something similar could be done in industry, how many reasons for discontent, how many dangers could be avoided.²

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Much earlier, in 1847, another spokesman of the Tuscan landed aristocracy, Vincenzo Salvagnoli, declared:

The owner prefers the well-being and dignity of the tenant to the highest income; he cares not for a machine, but for the man; he desires not a servant but a comrade . . . In such a relationship there is no desire on the one side to oppress, and no occasion for vengeance on the other. This benign economic relation has joined landlord and tenant together in a moral bond of civil harmony . . . These partners in agriculture would never stand as brother against brother in civil war.³

Moreover, the 'official' view continued, the tenant, beneficiary of such a salutary moral relationship with his betters, could have no material ground for complaint. The standard of living of the Tuscan *mezzadro*, it was asserted, was the envy of the working classes of the world – honest, secure work; comfort; nourishment in abundance; and a model family life. Thus, in 1920, the official paper of the landlords' association of the Mugello in Florence province reminded its readers that

No class of workers in the world today has been able to achieve, or perhaps ever will be able to achieve, a standard of living equal to that which *mezzadria* provides the peasants.⁴

Singling out the tenant cottage for special praise, the landlords' correspondent reported that it was 'located on a healthy site, and [was] provided with animals, with ventilation, and with every comfort'.⁵

A moment's reflection reveals the implausibility of such a vision.⁶ It was the landlord who held power in the form of the ownership of the means of production – the land, the peasant cottage, the seed, the fodder, the tools and machinery of cultivation, and the work animals – and in the form of the right of eviction; the *mezzadro* possessed only his own labour power and perhaps a few simple implements such as a hoe and rake, and the odd farm animal. It would have been surprising if the formal contractual equality of the 'partners' had negated the effective economic supremacy of the landlord. In fact, a number of secondary pacts supplementing the primary *mezzadria* relationship bear witness to the power vested in ownership. The specifics varied, but nearly everywhere the *mezzadro* was bound, beyond the surrender of half of the crop of his plot, to render a number of tributes and special services to the lord of the estate. Typical additional duties were: to work for a period of the year off the *podere* without compensation, transporting the landlord's share of the harvest to market or digging ditches to improve the property; to provide the owner with established quantities of olive oil or wine, or a given number of fowls; to gather wood for the landlord's hearth; and to wash the landlord's linen. Moreover, the lord exercised the right to regulate the private life of his partner, superintending his dress and religious

observance, forbidding him to marry without consent, to attend cafés and gaming rooms, and ordering him to work off the estate. The sanction was eviction.

In addition, the provision that the tenant should assume 50 per cent of the expense of cultivation meant that his entitlement to half the product of his own labour was but a legal fiction. The reason was that the peasant had no capital, so that he was compelled to receive advances of seed, fodder and fertilizer from the landlord's storehouse, to employ work animals from the owner's stables; and to use the equipment and tools of the proprietor's shed. The use of these items then figured at harvest time as so many deductions from the *mezzadro's* due. The bookkeeping system of estimates (*stime*) by which the lord's capital was assessed allowed ample room for profit by the owner. The value of the advanced capital – seed, equipment, animals – was reckoned at the start of the agricultural year at current market prices and then at the end when accounts were settled, any difference in price making a difference in the way the crop was apportioned. Here, of course, was an opportunity for speculation, and it seldom worked to the disadvantage of the proprietor, as the market value of the landlord's capital was likely to be high when items were provided to the tenants and low at harvest time when accounts were settled. Not unknown was the practice of advancing inferior grains against a return in full-value crops.⁷ In any case, the fact that pacts were not written but based on informal agreement and local custom allowed ample scope for abuse by the powerful. In the quiet but unending struggle over the respective shares of the product, the economic power of the landlord decided the issue in his favour.

Beyond this silent conflict over the division of the product, there was another equally important opposition with regard to the actual size of the harvest. The landlord's claim was that there was no possibility of discord as both parties to the contract could only gain by the largest possible output, with the harmonious result that each worked spontaneously for the greatest good of the other. In fact, however, in the long run this formal symmetry of interest was overbalanced by the asymmetry of economic power. For the tenant, the stake was survival as he cultivated for subsistence; for the lord, it was a question of profit. The landlord over a period of time, was able to exploit this difference of emphasis, together with his right to re-order his estate and its division into *poderi*, for his private advantage. The landlord, that is, stood to gain by increasing the intensity of cultivation by reducing the size of the *podere* to the minimum indispensable for the tenant family to subsist. From a smaller plot the requirement of survival was unchanged for the peasant, so that the landlord could obtain a greater exploitation of labour. Moreover, it was

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easily discovered that the possible minimum size of the *podere* was elusive: the labour the *mezzadro* could extract from himself and his family had a high upward elasticity. Thus there was a long-term tendency for the condition of the *mezzadro* to be reduced to a bare subsistence, obtained by ever-greater toil within a family context in which hours limitations, legal holidays, and child-labour legislation did not apply. Already in 1858, a student of Tuscan agriculture, P. Cuppari, observed:

If the *podere* is too small, the landlord benefits at the expense of the sharecropper. Truly in such cases the peasant will be bound, by dint of industry and extraordinary labour, to seek to squeeze from his small *podere* a sustenance for his now excessive family . . . The gross product increases in this case as a result of the overwork of the peasant, who none the less gets no more than half of the product.

From this is derived the tendency of the Tuscan landlords to draw ever more narrowly the boundaries of the *poderi* and to make investment in land rather than agricultural improvement. A limit to the trend continually to reduce the area of the *poderi* is provided only by the expense necessary to effect the division . . .⁸

If the tenant fell into arrears in his annual account with the estate, the landlord had a further instrument with which to extract a surplus or, as the Catholic theorist Giuseppe Toniolo commented, a 'supplementary income'.⁹ In such cases the *mezzadro* was able to settle accounts only by working in the off-season for the landlord at disadvantageous wage rates well below those earned by day labourers. This was the phenomenon one author terms 'debt labour', by means of which the proprietor secured cheap labour year-round for the estate.¹⁰ In bad years the landlord could partly offset this loss of revenue by squeezing forced labour from the tenant through the debt mechanism.

It was this ability by various devices endlessly to intensify labour that was the magic economic secret of *mezzadria* which enabled it to survive into the modern world in the face of competition from more rationalized and advanced systems of agriculture.¹¹ Already in 1836 Marquis Capponi, one of the largest of Tuscan landlords, pointed accurately to unrelenting toil by the tenants as the vital economic underpinning of *mezzadria* – a toil that was as dear in human terms as it was cheap to the lords. 'Regarding man as an instrument of labour,' wrote Capponi,

our agriculture is costly in the extreme; but, under any other system, man would do less and cost more. The cultivator is always on the spot, always careful. His constant thought is, 'This field is my own' . . . The amount of labour bestowed by the cultivator would prove too costly to the proprietor if obliged to pay for it; it would not answer his purpose.¹²

Moreover, contrary to the 'official' view of sharecropping life, recent studies of the *mezzadria* system have concluded that by the early twentieth

century the remuneration of sharecroppers was not only low, but actually lower than that of any category of industrial worker.¹³

Finally, if the landlord compensated for low productivity by the overwork of the peasant family and by the low level of remuneration of its members, he further fortified himself against adversity by a minimum of outlay on transfer and welfare payments. The *mezzadro*, that is, received no pension, no sickness and disability compensation, and few attentions from costly charitable or public institutions. Thus, comparing the welfare condition of *mezzadro* and worker, the socialists of Florence addressed the peasants in 1900 to point out the disadvantages of their position. Take one example, the socialists began,

When a worker falls ill – since the labourers in the town have made themselves heard, and intend to be aided in their needs – he is received *free of charge* by the hospitals, and the commune pays the bill with the money of everyone – that is, also with the money of you peasants who pay taxes. But, if one of you peasants takes ill, he must bear his suffering and cause his family to suffer in toil. Or if the peasant wants to come to the hospital, perhaps for an operation, then he must meet the fee of 2.50 lire a day. It is as if you peasants were not impoverished labourers who need to be cared for by society . . . when, because of sickness, you cease to work and therefore to earn.¹⁴

For the peasant unable to work, the tenants themselves would provide through the institution of the extended family – a solution at once thrifty and conducive to public order.

Of the benefit of their savings in welfare payments the Georgofili were, of course, well aware. Carlo Massimiliano Mazzini discussed at length the welfare legislation of 1883 and 1898 that provided accident, disability, and old-age compensation for workers in industry.¹⁵ For Mazzini such benefits for industrial workers were a necessary means to combat socialism,¹⁶ but he understood that ‘it is not light this new burden that weighs on Italian industry’,¹⁷ and he rejoiced that there was no need to extend welfare payments to the sharecroppers, who posed no subversive threat.¹⁸

Such aspects apart, *mezzadria* was a highly vulnerable system, as a variety of factors produced a tendency towards backwardness and inflexibility in its production methods – a fact noted by nearly all students of the Tuscan countryside. Speaking at the Accademia dei Georgofili in 1837, Cosimo Ridolfi seized on the essential point when he remarked:

Neither is our land fertile, nor are we abundant in our use of fertilizers, and if production continues it is due solely to the great labour and diligence of cultivation which is obtainable only on estates held in *mezzadria*.¹⁹

The organization of *mezzadria* production for subsistence – a sort of miniature autarky of the *podere* – effectively precluded specialization of