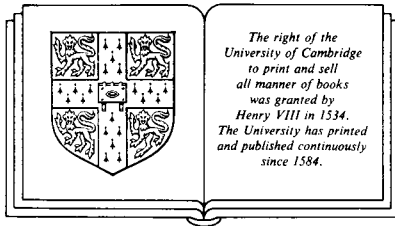


VIOLENCE AND  
GREAT ESTATES IN  
THE SOUTH OF  
ITALY

*Apulia, 1900–1922*

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*Note:* Except for the map of Apulia, all these illustrations have been reproduced from originals in the Archivio Privato Pavoncelli at Cerignola by the courtesy of Count Pavoncelli.

## INTRODUCTION

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Apulia, with its population of 2,130,000 in 1911, was the only region in the South of Italy to produce an organized and powerful peasant movement. On the great latifundia that dominated the countryside of the Apulian interior, the farm workers launched a prolonged and combative campaign for the emancipation of labour. Consciously revolutionary in intent, the movement aimed at the institution of the right to work, the monopoly of the labour market, and the expropriation of the landlords in favour of producers' cooperatives. General strikes, land occupations, and local insurrections were the means of achieving this ambitious vision.

A major purpose of this work is to explain the rise of the farm workers' movement. During the period of great social and economic change marking the Italian industrial revolution and the commercialization of agriculture, peasants elsewhere in the South failed to create stable forms of political opposition to the power of the landlords. Despite appalling living conditions and brutal labour relations, they remained individualists. In Apulia, by contrast, the agricultural labourers exhibited a fierce determination to make their own history. The hypothesis is that their resistance was neither an irrational millenarianism nor a blind attempt to preserve antiquated social relationships. They attempted in a highly disciplined manner to experience economic development on their own terms rather than as its passive victims. An important problem is to explain the features of Apulian agricultural life which encouraged the emergence of a clear sense of class solidarity among those who worked the land.

To answer this question about a movement that has not yet found a historian, it is essential to reconstruct the texture of the labourers' lives in the teeming agricultural centres of the region. Wage scales, the work day, housing, rates of literacy, diet, gender roles, and causes of death are all important considerations. What were the relations among landlords, farmers, and labourers? How were the workers' lives affected by economic change, emigration, war, and the recurring crop failures of a backward and precarious agricultural system? Where possible, it is crucial to follow the descriptions the farm workers themselves provided of their experience in the direct testimony of proverbs, songs, and interviews. The aim is to undertake not the political history of the workers' movement but the social history of the society within which it emerged.

As the organization of the farm labourers in the region was anarcho-syndicalist in orientation, this work is also a study in the social bases of revolutionary syndicalism, which is still an underdeveloped area of Italian history. In the circumstances of early-twentieth-century Apulia, syndicalism was emphatically not a primitive protest marking a stage in the evolution towards a "mature" marxian socialist consciousness, nor was it a movement of uprooted petty bourgeois intellectuals. Syndicalism was instead a rational and disciplined response to the conditions the workers faced, and a denial of the bureaucratic reformism of the trade unions and the socialist party. The appeal of libertarian ideas, the effectiveness of direct action, organization by occupational grouping, and the general strike are all important considerations. Another purpose is to investigate the local issues raised, the sources of subversive ideas in a remote agricultural region, and the social groups most actively involved.

Since agrarian history cannot, however, be written exclusively "from the bottom up" by a one-sided attention to the agricultural labourers, it is essential also to consider the landed elite in equal detail. Only in this way is it possible to understand the logic of estate management and to explore the interface between landlord and field hand where politics had their origin. What were the

profitability constraints within which farmers operated as Apulia was integrated into a national and international market? What was the movement of rents, prices, and costs? What were the mechanisms through which proprietors exercised their economic domination and their political control? What was their lifestyle, and how was it seen by the men and women they employed? What was the system of land tenure, and what were the methods of production? The impression is that it was not only poverty but also wealth that combined with the ubiquitous presence of hunger, debt, and early death to generate a sense of injustice and the idea of an alternative distribution.

Most of all, however, this book is a study of political violence. The reason is that violence was the essence of the relationship between landlords and farm workers in Apulia. The region earned a reputation as the “land of chronic massacres”. Force was no accidental feature, but rather an integral part of labour discipline. Latifundism was fundamentally a labour repressive system of production. As political resistance to the system began increasingly to threaten the continuation of profit, deference, and hierarchy, violence escalated. As the unionization drive deepened and as massive strikes swept all before them, landlords turned from the individual violence of estate guards and overseers to the recruitment of gangs in the criminal underworld, the direct military occupation of cities, and the unleashing of a civil war to destroy the closed union shop. Here it is important to understand the uses of violence in the operation of Apulian latifundism. What were the instruments of violence and the changing forms that it took over time? It is hoped that such a study will have important implications for an understanding of latifundism and of the Italian Liberal state.

Since fascism was the final stage in the confrontation between proprietors and farm labour, the work is also, inevitably, a study in the social background to the rise of fascism. Fascism in Apulia had a long gestation period. Squadrist terror marked the end of the wave of strikes and demonstrations that began in 1901. The guns of Giuseppe Caradonna and Salvatore Addis drove sub-



version underground and reimposed the rule of property. Who supported this enterprise and how did it operate? What were the particular features of Apulian fascism?