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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.

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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

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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-

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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?

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WHEAT AND SHEEP

In 1900 the three provinces of Bari, Foggia, and Lecce were said to form "two Apulias". In a pattern common in southern Italy, coastal zones presented a sharp contrast with the interior. The coast, or *marina*, was an area of intensive cultivation of commercial crops (grapes, olives and almonds) grown largely by small peasant cultivators. Living standards were frequently low, but a number of factors inhibited political organization. These influences included a relatively stable social position for the peasants, steady employment for most of the year, long-term personal relations with the landlords, and the moderating role of the Church. In the *marina* a scattered pattern of settlement inhibited sociability, a complex system of stratification divided the peasants, and the dispersal of landownership blurred the lines of class cleavage. In such conditions the peasant remained an individualist. The *marina* was not an area of open class strife.

As a first approximation, one can define this zone as the southeast corner of Bari province – roughly the territory to the east of a line drawn from Bitonto to Alberobello – and most of Lecce province[1] except for: (1) the area of latifundia north of Taranto centred on the commune of Castellaneta and (2) scattered small wheat-producing enclaves, of which the most important was the zone surrounding Nardò. At the height of the rural agitation elsewhere in the region there was no organized peasant movement anywhere in this zone. The "father of Apulian socialism", Canio Musacchio, reported to the regional farm workers' congress in 1903, "Lecce province is unable to set up its own proletarian

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1 Apulia at the period covered in this book.

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organization."[2] In the local elections of 1920, when the left won control of large areas of Apulia, not a single commune in Lecce province returned a socialist majority. A recent study properly refers to the "silence" of the peasants of Lecce.[3] When unionization did occur on a significant scale in the Salento after the Great War, it took place only in such communes as Castellaneta and Nardò, which were the southernmost extensions of the latifundia rather than areas representative of the *marina*. The *marina*, therefore, is marginal to our concerns.

The rest of the region – the "other Apulia" – was dominated by great estates or latifundia. The heart of latifundism in Apulia was the great plateau known as the Tavoliere, which was bounded on the north and east by the Gargano Promontory and the Adriatic, on the south by the Ofanto River, and on the west by the Apennine Mountains. Covering 3,000 square kilometres in Foggia province, the Tavoliere was a zone of highly concentrated landownership. A representative case was that of Cerignola, the storm centre of the peasant movement. Cerignola was among the most extensive communes in Italy, with 61,000 hectares, two-thirds of which were owned by just three families. Altogether the landed interest comprised just 100 families. Similarly, in the commune of Foggia great estates covered 60 per cent of the 50,993 hectares of the territory, and 103 proprietors owned no less than 40,000 hectares.[4]

The holdings of such landlords were divided into smaller productives units or *masserie*, which were typically 100–500 hectares in size. The Apulian *masseria* was divided between extensive single crop wheat cultivation and pasture through the regulating mechanism of a backward and soil-depleting three-field rotation (the *terziata*) consisting of two years of wheat followed by a year of fallow. This antiquated cycle was common to the overwhelming majority of farms. It was replaced occasionally by the still more harmful *quartiata* – three consecutive years of wheat and one of fallow.[5] The financial management of these estates was often highly sophisticated, but the primitive methods of cultivation were legendary – the absence of fertilization and irrigation; the

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stunted development of animal husbandry; the use of archaic work tools such as the mattock, the sickle, the scythe, and a light and almost neolithic plough pulled by mules that literally scratched the surface of the soil; the year of fallow; the broadcasting of seed.[6] There were virtually no experimental farms or institutes of agronomy. The term latifundium and the antiquarian qualities of production are misleading, however, if they suggest that the estates were in any sense feudal survivals. On the contrary, the latifundia of the Tavoliere were a modern creation: they emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century on the crest of a speculative property boom.

Until unification, most of the plain had been an uninhabited sheep walk on which planting was forbidden by law.[7] The restrictive legislation was devised by Francesco Montaluber in the reign of Alfonso I of Aragon in the fifteenth century as an experimental fiscal measure designed to generate income for the crown through a levy on sheep brought to pasture from the Abruzzi. The sheep regime at the outset was a response to the demographic and social catastrophe of the fourteenth century, when famine, plague, the collapse of prices, and chronic insecurity had already led to mass flight from the land and the near destruction of Apulian agriculture. Cultivation, largely abandoned in practice, was formally restricted to a small number of authorized farmers – the *locati* – who planted fields of wheat in the midst of an immense permanent pasture. At its height, the Tavoliere accommodated 1,700,000 sheep. The very name Tavoliere originated with the Aragonese regulations. It was derived from the record books governing the tax on grazing – the *tavolae censurae*. Tavoliere originally, therefore, meant "customs zone".

The restrictive provisions, briefly interrupted during the Napoleonic era, were reaffirmed by the restored Bourbon regime in 1817. The Bourbons, fearful of change and opposed to modernization, sought to preserve the immobilism of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies by sealing off the second largest plain in Italy from contamination by commercial and subversive influence. Identical provisions applied as well to the west of Bari province from

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Spinazzola to Santeramo, where the social structures which emerged were identical to those of Capitanata. By the law of 26 February 1865, the Risorgimento, the Italian bourgeois revolution, abolished the four centuries of regulation and opened the Tavoliere to cultivation and the land to purchase. Foggia province in particular came to be known as the "Italian frontier", the "California of the South" and the "Texas of Apulia" as the scramble for land began.[8] A region of shepherds, commented a Bari newspaper, was transformed into a population of farmers.[9]

The process of deregulation had profound consequences for Apulian history. The Tavoliere provides a perfect illustration of Gramsci's analysis of the Risorgimento as a "passive revolution" imposed "from above" by the agrarian and commercial bourgeoisie of the North and Centre of the peninsula in alliance with the landed classes of the South without involving or benefiting the broad mass of the peasant population. Instead of attempting to use the disposal of the Tavoliere to create a broad base of popular support by creating a substantial class of peasant proprietors, Liberal Italy made its peace with the more backward propertied classes of the South. The Liberal common-land commissioner at Altamura in the 1860's, Vito Orofino, had hoped that the land settlement after unification would establish a democratic social system that would "demonstrate the advantages of the present free institutions to those citizens, now despised and ignorant, who will appreciate the difference between the old regime and the new".[10] Instead, Liberal Italy followed the course of least resistance by conciliating the powerful and wealthy notables eager to buy.

Financial exigency reinforced political expediency. After the burden of the wars of unification, the immediate priority of the new state with regard to the Tavoliere was to realize the maximum value from the sale of the land as rapidly as possible. The way to achieve this aim was to sell the property in large units to wealthy buyers with ready cash. Accordingly, disentailment was accomplished by legislation drafted hurriedly and rushed through parliament providing for the sale of large estates by public auction. The

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existing *latifondisti* – the former *locati* – were also confirmed in their holdings, which they were allowed to redeem from the state.

On the Tavoliere and in western Bari province, therefore, the early decades of unification concluded with the clear division of the population into two great unequal classes – the few landowners and the mass of the landless. In the observation of Orofino, Altamura was split between those with carriages and those without. Thereafter, there was little possibility, without active political intervention, of reversing the process. The sharp upward spiral in land values, the absence of agricultural credit, and a succession of crises in the last decades of the century placed landownership well beyond the reach of peasant proprietors. Virtually the entire plain was owned by just five hundred landlords.

By comparison with the North and Centre of the peninsula, there were severe limits to the productive potential of Apulia. The Tavoliere was far from expanding urban markets. The soil was hard and rocky, and the covering layer of topsoil was thin. The climate was forbidding: Apulia was notorious for its unreliable and badly distributed rainfall, violent storms, late spring frosts, and the strong prevailing wind from the south known as the Altina that swirled across the plain unbroken by any barrier of trees.[11] There was no supporting infrastructure of credit, marketing, and technical information facilities. The work force was unskilled, badly nourished, and illiterate. There was no dependable supply of water. The whole plain, moreover, was lethally infested with malaria. Most malarial of all was the zone between Foggia and the Ofanto River. As rivers dried up in the summer, they left stagnant ponds that were ideal breeding grounds for mosquitoes. The lack of drainage further encouraged the formation of deadly pools of water after the heavy rains that normally fell in late spring and in September.[12]

Thus the potential for modernization was hemmed in with constraints. The imitation of the fully rationalized northern farm was precluded. Within the more stunted context of the South,

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