

ITALIAN LECTURE

THE LATIFUNDIA IN MODERN SICILIAN  
HISTORY

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THE island of Sicily was little known to the north Italians who annexed it in 1860. Sicilian history had been Spanish and African as much as Italian. Some northerners had visited Messina and Palermo, but these towns and the luxuriant subtropical plantations along the coast bore little relation to the country inland. The waste lands of the latifundia were unknown territory. Few foreigners and even fewer Italians from the mainland penetrated that far.<sup>1</sup> The Sicilian landlords who owned the interior sometimes died without ever seeing their estates, or at best made only rare and hurried visits with an armed guard to receive the homage of their serfs. The history of this sad and desolate region is therefore known to us only sketchily. An almost entirely illiterate society produced few except official documents; and as for officialdom, it seldom moved away from the coast and the towns. Probably no government had ever effectively controlled the interior of Sicily: the only recognized authorities inland were either the private mounted guards on every latifondo, or else what we would now call the mafia. Outside influences had little impact so far from the mainstream of European culture. The French Revolution made little or no impression; the very existence of an Industrial or Agrarian Revolution was known only to a few scholars. The Spanish and then the Austrian Viceroy had learnt to leave well alone.<sup>2</sup> Neither the Neapolitan Bourbons who arrived in 1735 nor the Italian Government after 1860 brought any dramatic change. The passing of time caused some development in the cities and along the coast,

<sup>1</sup> G. Visconti Venosta in 1853 reported that even 'a journey along the coast by land was not often made, except by an occasional Englishman; wherefore we were generally taken for English', *Memoirs of Youth*, London, 1914, pp. 207-8.

<sup>2</sup> The Viceroy had instructions to travel periodically through the island, but for some centuries had not done so, D. M. Giarrizzo, *Saggio su le strade carrozzabili del regno di Sicilia*, in *Nuova Raccolta di Opuscoli*, Palermo, 1790, p. 204. Even the journey from Palermo to Messina was usually made by sea.

but many of the peasants inland continued to live much as their ancestors had done a thousand years before. These were two different worlds; and so little contact was there between them that town-bred Sicilians who formed the political class could not easily see how the survival of such a primitive agricultural society was the chief obstruction to their own economic and political development. This became clear only as other countries and other provinces of Italy advanced their economies and left Sicily more and more behind. Then at last, after centuries of being taken for granted, the latifondo and the methods of agriculture associated with it began to come under suspicion and to be seen as not predetermined or inevitable. Some people even began to look on them as an unmitigated but largely remediable disaster; and this led to various attempts at reform. It is the light thrown by these changes in attitude and policy on Sicilian history which forms the subject of this lecture.

The latifondi were large ranches owned mainly by a few hundred among the 142 Princes, the 788 Marquises, and the 1,500 Dukes and Barons of Sicily. Some were also owned collectively by the villages as common land. Statistics are lacking until quite recent times, but one can assume that down to the twentieth century these ranches covered well over half the island.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The proportion is hard to establish, and of course varied from time to time. Afán de Rivera in 1820 said that four-fifths of Sicily were latifondi, *Pensieri sulla Sicilia al di là del faro*, Naples, 1820, p. 34. Professor G. Caruso in 1870 said 77 per cent., *Studi sulla industria dei cereali in Sicilia e le popolazioni che la esercitano*, Palermo, 1870, p. 12. Senator P. Villari in the 1890's said three-quarters, *Scritti sulla questione sociale in Italia*, Florence, 1902, p. 44. The first detailed figures were those of Professor G. Lorenzoni in 1907-10, from the report of the commission headed by Senator Faina, *Inchiesta parlamentare sulle condizioni dei contadini nelle provincie meridionali e nella Sicilia*, Rome, vol. vi, 1910. Basing himself only on estates larger than 500 acres, Lorenzoni found 1,400 of these, belonging to 787 people and covering 29.7 per cent. of Sicily. One-sixth of the island was owned by 173 people in farms larger than 2,500 acres, vol. vi, pt. 11, pp. 361-2. Lorenzoni admitted that these figures were an underestimate, but they were probably much more so than he thought. Firstly, they came only from the tax authorities, and so were highly suspect. Secondly, many latifondi were under 500 acres, and some even under 200 acres, cf. the report of the Jacini committee, *Atti della giunta per l'inchiesta agraria e sulle condizioni della classe agricola*, vol. xiii dealing with Sicily, ed. A. Damiani, Rome, 1885, pt. 3, p. 570. Lorenzoni's figures for one sample province, Trapani, were corrected by Professor Passalacqua, who used much more evidence than just the tax figures, and his results, more than doubling Lorenzoni's number and area, were later accepted by Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*,

Their chief characteristic was not so much size (other parts of Italy had equally large farms) as a type of agriculture. For centuries they had grown cereals alternating with rough pasture, and in such a predatory manner that the land gave only one crop of wheat in three years and usually less than nine bushels an acre. This low yield was thought quite natural by most farmers, for Sicily's economic dilapidation over the centuries had been generally accepted with the hopeless resignation of the *Gattopardo*, and it was assumed that the laws of nature—climate, soil, lack of capital—left no alternative to this extensive kind of agriculture. But by 1800 some people were beginning to suspect that these natural causes were mostly an excuse and that in fact there were powerful social reasons preventing change. No landowner except the most eccentric would stoop to be an active farmer, let alone live in the countryside. Many resided abroad and almost all the others in Palermo. The profits of agriculture were spent only in the towns on luxuries and the purchase of titles. While there were splendid palaces in the coastal cities, none existed inland. You could ride for hours through the countryside without seeing a farmhouse, a road, or even a tree. Capital was available, but just not mobilized productively. The latifondi were usually let out to stewards or gabelotti on 3 to 6 year leases, and by them to the peasants on a yearly basis, despite the fact that these two types of tenancy were obviously harmful. As no compensation was given for improvements, every gabello and peasant had an interest in taking a quick profit and exhausting the soil. They would gain nothing from planting vines or oranges; nothing from taking trouble with irrigation; everyone had an interest in cutting down trees, no one in planting them.<sup>1</sup> Worst of all, perhaps, was the disadvantage that this type of agriculture

pt. ii, p. 382; and G. Lorenzoni, *Trasformazione e colonizzazione del latifondo siciliano*, Florence, 1940, p. 44.

<sup>1</sup> An adviser of the British ambassador wrote in 1813 that agriculture on the latifondi 'is only one degree removed beyond the system of cultivation by slaves. It surely cannot be the interest of any man who cultivates the soil on these terms to lay out on the land any portion of his share of the produce, for as he is a tenant at will he may be deprived of his holding at the pleasure of his lord, and all his exertions to increase the total produce tend to enrich his master without adding in any considerable degree to his own wealth', 'Suggestions for removing the Evils Arising from the Corn laws', Heytesbury Papers, British Museum MS. 41514, p. 24. The British consul confirmed that the gabella or lease was rarely more than three years; sometimes the tenant had an option for a second three years, very rarely indeed for more than that, and never for more than nine years altogether, J. Goodwin (1836), 'An Essay on Sicilian Industry', British Museum MS. 42152, p. 23.

condemned the great majority of Sicilians to severe unemployment and what was at best a half-time job. Moreover, the same poor piece of land had to provide a living simultaneously for the owner, the gabello, often a sub-gabello, and then the peasant who did the actual farming.

The latifondi had not always been associated so exclusively with these wasteful methods of farming. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the nobles had shown a much greater readiness to invest in agriculture. Scores of new villages had then been built and workers attracted to them by being given perpetual leases or enfiteusi.<sup>1</sup> This had greatly contributed to the public welfare. But by the second half of the eighteenth century the aristocracy were regarding their estates mainly as a source of social prestige and political power. The insecurity, the malaria, and general discomfort of the countryside had made them lose interest in practical agriculture, and there were important political and tax advantages in living at Palermo. From their own point of view this change was quite understandable, however damaging it may have been to the Sicilian economy as a whole. Because of inflation they now preferred short leases to enfiteusi. Dealing with a single gabello who paid in advance was more dignified and convenient than dealing directly with many peasants who always needed credit and often defaulted. So the habit had grown up of handing over the general supervision of agriculture to middlemen whose interest was to exploit the land over the short term for the quickest possible return; and a social habit in such a conformist society was almost impossible to break.

By 1800 one or two individuals had drawn attention to this development and its consequences. The parasitic effects on agriculture of the gabello had been noted by the economist Sergio as early as 1777; he saw that 'small holdings cared for by a peasant proprietor will yield twice or three times as much as land rented out to a middleman'.<sup>2</sup> In the 1780's De Cosmi said exactly the same; agricultural output could easily be quadrupled, and what prevented this were by no means climatic reasons but the fact that farms were much too large and that not enough farmers

<sup>1</sup> C. A. Garufi, *Patti agrari e comuni feudali di nuova fondazione in Sicilia*, in *Archivio Storico Siciliano*, Palermo, 1947, vol. ii, pp. 48-67. E. Pontieri, *Il tramonto del baronaggio siciliano*, Florence, 1943, pp. 51-55. R. Romeo, *Il risorgimento in Sicilia*, Bari, 1950, pp. 18-19. V. Titone, *Economia e politica nella Sicilia del sette e ottocento*, Palermo, 1947, pp. 195-8, 241.

<sup>2</sup> V. E. Sergio, *Lettera sulla pulizia delle pubbliche strade di Sicilia*, Palermo, 1777, pp. 18, 29-30.

owned their land.<sup>1</sup> The Abbé Guerra drew attention to the lack of investment in agriculture, to the absence of roads and farm houses, to the fact that the aristocracy preferred to spend their money on foreign luxuries, leaving their peasantry in a state of barbarism which was a real danger to society. He observed that the ignorance about any rotation of crops led to two fields out of every three being left absolutely uncultivated each year, and the remaining third gave the peasants work for only several months a year.<sup>2</sup> The Marquis Giarrizzo in 1788 remarked that the habit of renting out to middlemen had grown up only in the past twenty years, and he thought that the Government would have to act urgently to reverse it. The urbanization of the nobility had not only led to capital being taken out of the land, but farm labourers also were leaving in substantial numbers to enter domestic service in the towns. Moreover the gabelotti, since they had to pay rent in advance, were obliged to kill off cattle and cut down timber to meet this initial expense. In many obvious ways the system was defective.<sup>3</sup>

The most serious student of the problem was the Abbé Balsamo who became Professor of Agriculture at Palermo in 1787. He commented in 1800 that, 'there is hardly another country in Europe where so much land is owned in large farms by so few and where landowners have so little desire to live in or even to visit their estates. The inevitable result is that no improvements are made in agriculture—and this despite the fact that the climate should make agriculture as good in Sicily as anywhere else in Europe.'<sup>4</sup> It was a sad fact that 'there is hardly one of our large landowners who is an active farmer', and the number was decreasing. Even among the gabelotti there was a rapid increase in those whose chief ambition was to copy the aristocracy and become non-working non-resident managers with no direct interest in the land.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile the peasants were left to themselves without guidance, to continue their antiquated methods

<sup>1</sup> G. E. De Cosmi, *Alle riflessioni su l'economia*, Catania, 1786, pp. 41-46.

<sup>2</sup> G. Guerra, *Stato presente della città di Messina*, Naples, 1781, pp. 77-78; Guerra, *Memoria sulle strade pubbliche della Sicilia*, Naples, 1784, pp. 19, 31, 78.

<sup>3</sup> D. M. Giarrizzo, *Prospetto dei saggi politici ed economici su la pubblica e la privata felicità della Sicilia*, Palermo, 1788, pp. 23-30. Many of these criticisms were confirmed by a leading civil servant, G. Dragonetti, quoted in A. Petino, *La questione del commercio dei grani in Sicilia nel settecento*, Catania, 1946, p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> P. Balsamo (1800), *Memorie inedite di pubblica economia ed agricoltura*, Palermo, 1845, vol. i, pp. 78, 95-96.

<sup>5</sup> Balsamo (1792), *Memorie inedite*, vol. ii, pp. 190-1.

of cultivation. The obvious remedy, so said Balsamo and most other experts, was a greater division of land, longer leases, and more security of tenure for those who did the work.<sup>1</sup> Another political economist, Palmeri, agreed that the latifondi were uneconomically large, and above all blamed the landowners for insisting on short leases: there could be little real improvement until tenancies were thirty instead of six years long.<sup>2</sup> Palmeri was no great radical, but he put forward what was then the revolutionary view that the weakness of Sicily's economy was man-made rather than ordained by nature. Indeed there was 'a struggle between a bountiful nature which is eager to give and obstinate mankind who refuse to take'. If the land were only cultivated properly it could produce a great deal more and possibly six times as much.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Balsamo (1808), *A View of the Present State of Sicily*, ed. Vaughan, London, 1811, appendix p. xii. C. Afán de Rivera, 'the division of land into small holdings would be the most salutary measure of all for Sicilian prosperity', *Pensieri sulla Sicilia*, pp. 35-36. Di Blasi agreed with this, see Pontieri, *Il tramonto*, pp. 324-5. So did G. Meli, quoted by F. Renda, *La Sicilia nel 1812*, Caltanissetta, 1963, p. 102; and the Prince of Aci, quoted by Renda in *La Sicilia e l'unità d'Italia*, ed. M. Ganci, Milan, 1962, vol. ii, p. 529; and Professor R. Di Gregorio, *Discorsi intorno alla Sicilia*, Palermo, 1821, pp. 167-8; and by other clergy, see R. Composto, in *Studi Storici*, Apr. 1964, pp. 268-9; so, after a visit to Sicily, did Alexis de Tocqueville, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, 1866, vol. v, pp. 140-3. Lord Bentinck wanted 'to disperse landed property more generally', quoted by J. Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck and the British Occupation of Sicily, 1811-14*, Cambridge, 1956, p. 147. Prince Belmonte's view was given by Lord Valentia, 'they can only grant leases to their farmers for nine years, which has, in Belmonte's opinion, greatly contributed to the deterioration of Sicilian agriculture', 'Private Journal of the Affairs of Sicily, 1811-12', British Museum MS. 19426, p. 54. G. de Welz rather singled out the absurdity of giving leases to people who had no interest in improvements, *Saggio su i mezzi da moltiplicare prontamente le ricchezze della Sicilia*, Paris, 1822, p. 34. Professor Scinà saw that it was their vast stretches of territory which gave the latifondisti so little incentive to improve the land, *La topografia di Palermo e de' suoi contorni*, Palermo, 1818, p. 160. A much more critical comment in 1817 by a distinguished contemporary can be found in Gino Capponi, *i suoi tempi, i suoi studi, i suoi amici, memorie raccolte da Marco Tabarrini*, Florence, 1879, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> N. Palmeri, *Cause e rimedi delle angustie dell'economia agraria in Sicilia* (1826), ed. R. Giuffrida, Caltanissetta, 1962, pp. 13, 113, 120, 126, 152.

<sup>3</sup> Palmeri, in *Giornale di scienze, lettere ed arti per la Sicilia*, Palermo, vol. xxiii, 1828, pp. 288-95. S. Scrofani, *Memoria sulla libertà del commercio*, in *Scrittori classici italiani di economia politica*, Milan, 1805, vol. xl, p. 283. An English view was that Sicily 'requires only the aid of a moderate share of industry and skill to regain its pristine agricultural celebrity' (c. 1813), Heytesbury Papers, British Museum MS. 41514, p. 2. Balsamo, *Memorie inedite* (1808), vol. ii, pp. 103-4. Balsamo agreed that Sicilian agriculture should produce four times

Very few of the landowners were sufficiently rich, enlightened, or interested enough to attempt practical reforms on their own initiative. The Duke of Monteleone in the eighteenth century built a small irrigation dam on the River Piazza, but farmers did not know how to use the water thus provided and lack of maintenance led to flooding. Viscount Nelson in his enormous estate at Bronte (eventually it was to be 60,000 acres in extent) employed the head gardener of the royal palace at Caserta and made a small attempt at intensive cultivation.<sup>1</sup> At a later date the Prince of Castelnuovo was quite exceptional in leaving his money to found an institute for agricultural science which would send out free instruction to the peasants.<sup>2</sup> There was also a German prince who succeeded to the Butera estates and proved that a considerable profit could be made by enclosing land for altogether new types of crop.<sup>3</sup> Apart from these and a few other isolated individuals, in general the latifondisti preferred things as they were. To them the land was a symbol of prestige and so could not lightly be transferred to more active and capable hands. Instead of intensifying production to meet the needs of a growing population, they preferred to extend still further up the mountain-sides with the same superficial and semi-nomadic cultivation which characterized the latifondi. Balsamo realized that, as a result, far too much wheat was being grown on thoroughly unsuitable land. Much of Sicily was ideally suited to cereals, but laziness and habit led to growing wheat on land which was far better adapted to olives and vines. Hence, each year piled up bigger problems of soil erosion on the hill slopes, so wasting the country's chief economic asset; and ironically this great granary of the ancient world now had to import grain from Russia, Egypt, and America.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the teaching of Balsamo and his school, the as much as its present yield; quoted by Petino, *La questione del commercio dei grani*, p. 71.

<sup>1</sup> *Annals of Agriculture and Other Useful Arts*, ed. Arthur Young, London, 1802, vol. xxxix, pp. 463-4. The figure of 60,000 acres was given by the owner himself in *British Parliamentary Papers, Foreign Office*, 1891, no. 813, p. 9; this appears to be more than twice the original grant of land to Nelson in 1799, and so is one example of how the latifondi increased in the intervening century. Nelson never visited his estate.

<sup>2</sup> *Giornale di scienze, lettere ed arti*, vol. xxii, 1828, p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> Nassau William Senior, *Journals kept in France and Italy from 1848 to 1852*, London, 1871, vol. ii, p. 64. A. di Rudinì, in *Giornale degli Economisti*, Rome, Feb. 1895, vol. x, pp. 177-8.

<sup>4</sup> Balsamo (1799), *Memorie inedite*, vol. i, p. 73; and (1808) vol. ii, p. 90. Count G. Aceto, *De la Sicile et de ses rapports avec l'Angleterre*, Paris, 1827, p. 66.

Bourbon Government made some attempt to create a new class of small holders. Their aim was in part political, since small holders would be a more stable element in society than landless labourers—the fear of revolution was very real,<sup>1</sup> especially after 1789, and land hunger was a main cause of revolutionary sentiment. A second reason was economic; for the landowners had shown little sign of wanting to improve their land in the public interest, and hence there was a feeling that the *latifondi* somehow ought to be transformed by law. Obviously small holders would work harder and have more interest in improvements than either casual labour or absentee landlords. A few people could already perceive that division of the land was not by itself the whole answer; indeed, alongside the *latifondi* there was going to be a problem of excessively small divisions of land, especially as peasants lacked capital and were completely uninstructed in new agricultural techniques; small holders too, quite as much as wealthy *gabelotti*, had an interest in taking a few crops off virgin soil and so destroying the land.<sup>2</sup> But at least a fairly drastic reallocation of landed property would have to be part of the answer. King Ferdinand had such land redistribution in mind when he confiscated Jesuit property in 1767, and even more when in 1789 and afterwards he decreed the division of some of the extensive common lands and ecclesiastical estates in royal patronage. These decrees were applied very inefficiently in practice, and the poor for whom this land was chiefly intended rarely had the knowledge or the courage to claim their due; but the King's action did have some effect in bringing new areas into profitable production.<sup>3</sup>

At this moment the Napoleonic wars changed the whole situation in Sicily. The British occupation in the years 1806–15 caused a boom in agriculture. War-time inflation also forced the King into greater dependence upon the barons in parliament.

One-third of Sicily is over 500 metres above sea level, and a third of the surface is on a slope greater than 1 in 5 and so suitable only for wood or pasture.

<sup>1</sup> e.g. in 1782, when, on a sudden rumour of a popular riot, the nobles fled from Palermo, Marchese Villabianca, *Diario palermitano*, ed. G. Di Marzo, *Biblioteca storica e letteraria di Sicilia*, vol. xxvii, 1880, p. 345.

<sup>2</sup> Palmeri already in 1825 saw the damage sometimes done by excessive fractionalization of the land, *Giornale di scienze, lettere ed arti*, vol. xi, 1825, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Aceto, *De la Sicile*, p. 69. Di Gregorio, *Discorsi*, pp. 169–72. Scinà, *La topografia di Palermo*, p. 24. These small holdings near Palermo, many of them less than an acre in size, were still in existence and still profitable after a century, Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. iii, p. 365.

One result was the new 'English' constitution of 1812 and the 'abolition of feudalism'. The first scheme for that constitution was drafted by Balsamo. No doubt some of the constitutional leaders, if only because of the great fortunes which could be made from land during the occupation, were genuinely anxious to reduce restrictive practices in agriculture. But most of the barons when they voted to abolish feudalism had less enlightened and less public-spirited objects in mind. They were ready to give up their feudal jurisdiction and private prisons, but only in return for getting rid of feudal taxes and services and for renouncing the obligations which they had owed to the King and their peasants. What they wanted above all, and what they now obtained, was that feudal tenures should be converted into unfettered private property, and this was an immense gain. In return for it they surrendered little. Many feudal privileges survived long after 1812<sup>1</sup> and even into the twentieth century. The latifondi went on being called 'fiefs', the landowners 'feudatories' or 'barons', and the peasants 'villani'. The majority of barons in 1812 had little thought of any radical transformation which might make the large estates more fruitful. Many of them in the boom years had tripled their income on high wheat prices, but little of this went back into the soil.<sup>2</sup> Then came the collapse of 1815 and there was no surplus money for investment in agriculture.

Where the barons failed, the Bourbon monarchs after their return to absolute power in 1815 tried once more. First of all they reversed the decision of the barons in parliament and abolished the system of entails and primogeniture which had helped to keep the latifondi intact. Another radical law of 1824 permitted and even encouraged the transfer of land in settlement of debt. The barons, since none of them were farmers and hardly any did anything to improve their land, were so encumbered with debts that often half their revenue went to pay the interest on mortgages, and the collapse of agricultural prices after the Napoleonic wars made their position economically most

<sup>1</sup> V. Titone, *La costituzione del 1812 e l'occupazione inglese della Sicilia*, Bologna, 1936, p. 121. The successor of Lord Nelson, Lady Bridport, as 'Padre Abbate' of Maniace abbey, 'enjoys all the immunities and privileges appertaining to ecclesiastical jurisdiction', *British Parliamentary Papers, Foreign Office*, 1890, no. 155, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> C. Afán de Rivera, *Considerazioni su i mezzi da restituire il valore proprio a' doni che ha la natura largamente concesso al regno delle Due Sicilie*, Naples, 1832, vol. ii, p. 52.

vulnerable. Inevitably their creditors, who were sometimes (and increasingly) none other than their own land agents or gabelotti, would in time have to be allowed some share in that surviving baronial asset, the land. An indefinable middle class was appearing with money to invest in mortgages and even to buy titles of nobility—money which could possibly be attracted into productive agriculture. For these men as for all other Sicilians land was the universal object of social ambition, and in 1824, by allowing its freer transference, the Bourbons were making it easier for a new class of owner occupiers to emerge. Some estates were effectively broken up, especially near the towns<sup>1</sup> and above all round Palermo and Messina. A considerable transformation of the land took place in the east, for example, in the old County of Modica where social and economic traditions contrasted so strangely with the rest of Sicily. Much the same also happened near Marsala, where three English families were inventing the Marsala wine industry and so altering the economy and social composition of a whole area. But most of the land which changed hands as a result of these new laws ended up in possession of other large landowners. Especially it went to increase the ecclesiastical latifondi, for the Church had been one of the foremost money-lenders. It is also clear that, in so far as there were any middling gentry or galantuomini who emerged after 1824, they were mainly anxious to imitate the habits of behaviour and methods of cultivation practised by their predecessors. The landed interest was thus not weakened but actually strengthened by the appearance of an agrarian middle class. Once they had made their money these men too regarded work as demeaning and looked on the land mainly as a source of prestige and power. Hence, they themselves were soon absentee, exploiting landlords with a firm intention of neither improving agriculture nor

<sup>1</sup> Romeo, *Risorgimento in Sicilia*, pp. 173–4. Consul Goodwin thought that in fifty years a completely new class had arisen, largely from the gabelotti, which 'became the equals of the nobles in wealth and importance', 'Sicily, Social and Political', British Museum MS. 42150, p. 11. Judging from the area round Palermo, he saw that 'transfer is simple and easy and subdivision frequent and minute.... This subdivision has brought immense tracts into regular cultivation. Corn growing has been superseded in a great measure by the culture of the grape, olive, orange, almond and the shumach shrub', *Political Journal*, 30 July 1860, *Public Record Office*, London, F.O. 165/135. Goodwin also wrote two articles entitled *Progress of the Two Sicilies under the Spanish Bourbons from the year 1734–5 to 1840*, where he discussed the growth of the yeoman Borgesi ('capelli' or 'hats') as distinct from the Villani ('berretti' or 'caps'); in *Journal of the Statistical Society*, London, 1842, pp. 63–64, 179.

allowing the peasants enough security of tenure to emancipate themselves from servitude.

Another possibility explored by the Government, with similar lack of success, concerned the 'civic uses' or 'promiscuous rights' which until the abolition of feudalism the peasants possessed not only in the common lands but over large areas of the baronial fiefs. These very extensive rights often must have anteceded feudalism,<sup>1</sup> and in other cases we know that they had been freely granted by the nobles in order to attract labour to their estates. So widespread were they that 'ove son feudi ivi son usi civici' remained a familiar maxim down to the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> The most common were rights of hunting, wood collecting for fuel or building, charcoal burning, the grazing of animals, and access to water. Without these privileges a great many people would have been destitute. Yet it was easy to see that landowners or gabelotti could not possibly improve their land or bring in new crops and new methods while other people had this kind of condominium in the land and could pasture their flocks or even cut down trees there. To escape this encumbrance, some of the landowners, the more progressive as well as the more lawless, had arbitrarily enclosed parts of their own estates. For the same reason they had sometimes encroached illegally on the common lands and incorporated public property into their own latifondi. Or sometimes it had been the villages which, in their need for money to pay government taxation, had rented out some of the common lands to a neighbouring landlord, and in time it had come to be thought part of his property. To end these confusions, to help improve agriculture and create more small holders, the Bourbon Government addressed itself to this problem in a series of enactments between 1792 and 1841. The increase in population was requiring a greater intensity of production and hence clearer rights of ownership. Especially when the law of 1824 made it easier for feudal land to be transferred to more efficient or more grasping proprietors, there was considerable pressure on the King to act in this sense.

The Government, therefore, declared that these 'promiscuous rights' must go. Local commissions should then clear up problems of ownership. In return for the recognition of feudal property as freehold, the local populations should be compensated

<sup>1</sup> A. Pupillo-Barresi, *Gli usi civici in Sicilia: ricerche di storia del diritto*, Catania, 1903, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Report by Professor Carnevale, in Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, 1910, pt. ii, p. 303.

for the loss of valuable rights by being given in full possession at least one-fifth of any territory where they could establish a custom of ancestral usage.<sup>1</sup> In Naples a similar arrangement, made during the Napoleonic occupation, had worked well, for the Government there acted effectively against feudal abuses, and precise regulations had been laid down about how to enforce the law. But in Sicily no government had ever maintained effective law enforcement in the interior. The legal profession and the judiciary, even after the end of feudalism, remained dependent on the baronage,<sup>2</sup> and this had enormous importance. The Neapolitans on the royal Council encouraged King Ferdinand to make the Sicilian barons disgorge their encroachments on public property; but at this decisive moment the Sicilian ministers on the contrary succeeded in persuading the King to make possession of land evidence of title, and to lay the burden on local populations to prove illegal usurpation.<sup>3</sup> Such proof was virtually impossible to obtain. The villages did not have the archives or even the independent initiative required. Occasionally we hear that the Royal Intendants, especially in the eastern provinces, were able to help the local communities recover stolen property. Sometimes, especially in the period 1841-7, they were able to end the 'promiscuous rights' and to allocate some of the 'fifth part' thus freed to the villagers as the law decreed, even to the point of imposing an obligation on new tenants to improve the land thus distributed.<sup>4</sup> Taking all Sicily into account,

<sup>1</sup> It was roughly calculated by A. Battaglia in 1907 that, if only this 'fifth part' had been in fact distributed as the law of 1841 prescribed, there would have been enough land to settle 700,000 peasants, quoted in Renda, *Il movimento contadino nella società siciliana*, Palermo, 1956, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> 'Everything is done by bribery, and without it no magistrate would be able to maintain himself and family', Lord Valentia (1811), British Museum MS. 19426, p. 54. Judges are 'obliged to make out a livelihood by taking bribes' (1813), British Museum MS. 41514, p. 21. Yet evidently it was worth their while to buy their jobs, see Consul Fagan's papers, British Museum MS. 36730, p. 230. L. Blanch, *Mémoire sur la Sicile, août 1822*, in *Scritti storici*, ed. B. Croce, Bari, 1925, vol. ii, p. 259. Above all the report by P. C. Ulloa in 1838, given in E. Pontieri, *Il riformismo borbonico nella Sicilia del sette e dell'ottocento*, Naples, 1961, pp. 229, 237.

<sup>3</sup> Report by the French Ambassador at Naples, 28 Dec. 1841, ed. A. Saitta, *Annuario dell'istituto storico italiano per l'età moderna e contemporanea*, Rome, 1954, vol. vi, p. 314. Baronial satisfaction with the law is also shown in *Annali civili del regno delle Due Sicilie*, Naples, vol. xxxvi, 1844, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Goodwin, British Museum MS. 42150, p. 39. *Annali civili del regno*, Naples, vol. xxxii, 1843, p. 50. Document of 1844, in Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 308.

however, the law of 1841, which later generations under united Italy had occasion to think of with admiration and regret,<sup>1</sup> was opposed by the landholding interest and so could not be applied.

The landowners were paramount everywhere and naturally had no intention of giving up what they already possessed. They dominated the commissions set up by the Government to enforce these laws,<sup>2</sup> and their influence in the villages could almost always demolish any opposition. There were too many dubious questions of fact about what rights existed on their estates and how valuable these were, and they could hardly be expected to decide such questions against themselves. In the last resort they simply coerced the villages into giving up land which the law allocated to them.<sup>3</sup> Lawsuits over contested property were another expedient, and villages did not have the resources for this even if they had the courage or the patience.<sup>4</sup> When the village of Salaparuta in 1829 challenged the Prince of Villafranca over a piece of woodland he had illegally usurped, he burnt down the wood in defiance; the Intendant decided against him in 1842, but not until 1896 did the Appeal Court finally rule for the village, and division of the land began only in 1903, after seventy-four years.<sup>5</sup> This was no isolated example. Indeed this kind of litigiousness and countless long-drawn-out and expensive legal battles went far to explain why the profits of agriculture never came back to the land which had produced them.

The ending of feudalism, instead of reducing the latifondi, thus reinforced them, and its effect on agriculture was much less than might have been hoped. Certainly there was an increase in intensively cultivated crops, in vines, nuts, and horticulture; but as if to make up for this the latifondi extended their territory by ploughing up new land for cereals, and some of the new middling landowners were to do irreparable damage by indiscriminately clearing woodland to plant more wheat in the same

<sup>1</sup> e.g. V. Cordova, in evidence to the *Inchiesta agraria*, vol. xiii (ed. A. Damiani), pt. i, 1884, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> L. Bianchini, *Della storia economico-civile di Sicilia*, Palermo, 1841, vol. ii, p. 97. Palmeri, *Cause e rimedi*, p. 64. For the oligarchic nature and corruption of village government, Blanch, *Scritti*, vol. ii, p. 260.

<sup>3</sup> Carnevale, in Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 306. S. F. Romano, *Momenti del risorgimento in Sicilia*, Messina, 1952, pp. 151-5. F. de Stefano and F. L. Oddo, *Storia della Sicilia dal 1860 al 1910*, Bari, 1963, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> *Annali civili del regno*, Naples, vol. xxvii, 1841, p. 13; and vol. xxxix, 1845, p. 32. Pontieri, *Riformismo borbonico*, pp. 233-4.

<sup>5</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 291. Many other instances were also given here, e.g. p. 279.

extensive manner that was already so harmful.<sup>1</sup> An effective class of small holders was not created. Even on the rare occasions where the 'fifth part' was distributed, there was no scheme to help with credit or with farm implements and seed. The new tenants had no cash even to pay the rent and often were obliged to sell out almost before they had begun.<sup>2</sup> In any case there was insufficient land to compensate every person who suffered by the abolition of the 'promiscuous rights'. Many agricultural labourers lost their means of livelihood without any compensation whatever. Rural communities were deprived of property valued at millions of ducats. The peasants, cheated out of their immemorial rights, came close enough to starvation to be ready for any revolt<sup>3</sup> and henceforward were ready to use any moment of political crisis to invade those territories which they thought of as theirs. And paradoxically this peasants' revolt perpetually near the surface then unwittingly helped to unite Italy. The two most decisive movements of the risorgimento, in 1848 and 1860, both began in Sicily, and in each case this war of class revenge provided a major impetus. Without it Garibaldi could hardly have won and probably the 'Thousand' would never even have sailed.

Garibaldi's conquest of Sicily in 1860 was materially and perhaps decisively helped by the expectation of social and agrarian reform,<sup>4</sup> but once again the reformers were to be defeated, and once again revolution was to end in further enlargement of the latifondi. The old baronage had been in a very real sense

<sup>1</sup> Afán de Rivera, *Considerazioni*, vol. ii, pp. 35-37.

<sup>2</sup> G. Giarrizzo, in *La Sicilia e l'unità d'Italia*, ed. M. Ganci, vol. i, pp. 43-44.

<sup>3</sup> Francesco Ferrara, the distinguished Sicilian economist, wrote in a letter of Nov. 1847, 'three fourths of the peasants, sallow, sickly and deformed, vegetate rather than live. Born to no other end than to moisten the clods with the sweat of their brow, they feed upon herbs, clothe themselves in rags, and sleep huddled up together in smoky huts, amidst the stench of a dunghill', British Museum MS. 42150, p. 6. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, pp. 61-63, shows that by 1884 conditions had if anything become worse. 'Nos paysans sont absolument des sauvages', said the Prime Minister, di Rudini, after the revolt of 1893; quoted by another Sicilian landowner, the French Viscount Combes de Lestrade, *La Sicile sous la monarchie de Savoie*, Paris, 1894, p. 84. Share croppers in Sicily regularly had to surrender three-quarters of the produce (or even more) to the gabelloti in some areas; Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. iii, p. 394; and G. Alongi, *La mafia nei suoi fattori e nelle sue manifestazioni*, Turin, 1886, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. evidence of V. Cordova, quoted by Renda, in *Movimento operaio*, Milan, Aug. 1955, no. iv, p. 621. D. Mack Smith, *The Peasants' Revolt of Sicily in 1860*, in *Studi in onore di Gino Luzzatto*, Milan, 1949, vol. iii, pp. 201-40.

reinforced by a new class of *galantuomini*, *civili*, *cappeddi*, who had managed to penetrate and were now to perpetuate the apparatus of the old régime. With the larger Italian market creating better agricultural prices after 1860 there was to be another notable increase in intensively cultivated crops. But there also existed as it were counter tendencies which greatly aided the latifondisti and their imitators among the emergent gentry. The new parliamentary form of government was much easier for these men to manipulate than Bourbon paternalism had been. Since no peasant had a vote, an electorate of 2 per cent. of the population regularly returned nominees of the landed interest. The local oligarchies made a very effective deal with the Government from which each side gained a great deal. Aided by the mafia the local bosses could guarantee the election of reliable deputies, sometimes by a unanimous vote—or even, with excessive zeal, a more than unanimous vote.<sup>1</sup> Especially this was true after 1876 with governments of the Left<sup>2</sup> which could usually depend on solid support in parliament from these pocket Sicilian boroughs provided only that local affairs were left to the local bosses. In the words of a Sicilian Prime Minister, di Rudini, the Italian parliament thus knowledgeably abandoned the Sicilian people to the rapacity of local power groups.<sup>3</sup> As part of this compact, successive governments renounced any schemes of social reform and land reform. Sicily was therefore condemned by her own representatives in parliament not only to injustice but to continuing poverty.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. Palizzolo, a notorious mafioso who later was involved for a decade in trials arising out of the Notarbartolo murder, was first elected to parliament in Nov. 1876 for the mafia-dominated constituency of Caccamo; but this election was annulled by parliament when it was discovered that there was a suspicious unanimity about the voting, and in one area at least that more votes had been cast than there were eligible voters, *Atti parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, Discussioni*, 6 Feb. 1877, p. 1172. Out of eleven successive elections at Caccamo after 1861, five had to be annulled for various irregularities. M. Vaina, *Popolarismo e nasismo in Sicilia*, Florence, 1911, p. 42, gives another example of an excessive number of votes at Messina in 1909.

<sup>2</sup> S. M. Ganci, *La mafia nel giudizio di Napoleone Colajanni*, in *Quaderni del Meridione*, 1964, pp. 67–70. The Left came to office in 1876, but they failed to carry out their programme of social reform, and indeed their first Minister of Agriculture was a latifondista, Baron Majorana; see G. C. Marino, *L'opposizione mafiosa 1870–82*, Palermo, 1964, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> In conversation to the President of the Senate on 25 Jan. 1894, D. Farini, *Diario di fine secolo*, ed. E. Morelli, Rome, 1961, vol. i, p. 398.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. V. Lollini put the blame on southern deputies for making this pact with successive governments and so keeping their provinces backward in

In return for Sicilian support at Rome, local government, which was the only government most Sicilians knew, was left entirely to the grand electors and their friends.<sup>1</sup> Names of opposition voters were regularly struck off the electoral lists—even university professors were if necessary declared illiterate for this purpose. Local taxes were adjusted so that the land tax was minimal and in some cases nil, while the food taxes paid disproportionately by the disenfranchised peasantry were invariably high. Mules were taxed but not cattle, and so forth. Expenditure was adjusted the other way, so that theatres were built before hospitals, popular education was deliberately neglected, and money used instead to create sinecures for relatives of the mayor and corporation.<sup>2</sup> Above all there was the matter of the common

order that they could feather their own nests, 10 Dec. 1901, *Atti parlamentari*, p. 6596. De Felice-Giuffrida, *ibid.*, 4 Dec. 1901, p. 6765. G. Fortunato, 3 July 1896, *ibid.*, p. 7086. At the same time this arrangement worked in reverse to attenuate liberalism in northern Italy and to corrupt the working of parliamentary government; see R. Villari, *Mezzogiorno e contadini nell'età moderna*, Bari, 1961, p. 273.

<sup>1</sup> *L'insurrezione siciliana*, in *Giornale degli Economisti*, Rome, Feb. 1894, vol. viii, pp. 135–40. Marquis Di San Giuliano, 27 Feb. 1894, *Atti parlamentari*, p. 6746. S. F. Romano, *Storia dei fasci siciliani*, Bari, 1959, pp. 322–4. Evidence given by A. Manasia in Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 695. R. Mirabelli, 'the new feudatory now calls himself mayor, his court is called the municipal council, his *bravi* are the councillors and their private police force... Usurpation of the common lands goes on just as it did before. . . . These local authorities simply nominate the members of parliament, who then become their agents for every kind of ignoble and deceitful traffic', 21 June 1906, *Atti parlamentari*, pp. 8857–8. L. Franchetti, 'frequently the common lands of the village become the prey reserved to whichever party is in power; all local jobs are the perquisite of this party; and the laws become simply a weapon for pushing the advantage of the winning group against those who are not in power. For example, the local excisemen are chosen by the local bosses, and goods belonging to the latter are therefore exempt from tax. The village revenues are compensated for this loss by excess payments exacted from the other side. Every year when the electoral lists come to be revised they are full of names of people who are not even eligible to vote at all, but who are adherents of the mayor; and by the time that this can be corrected by the courts the elections are already over. This game is repeated each year. Furthermore the few local credit and charitable institutions which have survived the general rapine, as well as the local co-operative societies, have with few exceptions had their funds taken over and directed to the sole task of benefiting the party in office', *Condizioni politiche e amministrative della Sicilia*, Florence, 1877, pp. 65–66. A. Nasalli Rocca, *Memorie di un prefetto*, describes how strange this world seemed to a government official at Trapani in the years 1896–9, Rome, 1946, pp. 95–117.

<sup>2</sup> Villari, *Scritti sulla questione sociale*, pp. 66–71. Franchetti, *Condizioni politiche*, pp. 347–52. S. Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia*, Florence, 1925 ed.,

lands, which the Bourbons had tried to divide and so form a new class of small holders, but which were now handed over to the discretion of the same local authorities who had a vested interest in stopping such a division. In many areas allocation of the commons ceased abruptly after 1860 and the laws on this subject were simply ignored.<sup>1</sup> The elected local authorities looked on these lands as their own perquisite, to be let out to themselves at a peppercorn rent or even to be simply confiscated.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the peasants did receive land and managed to make it pay.<sup>3</sup> But there seems to have been a deliberate intention to give them at best only tiny plots of barren land in the remote countryside, and when they sold or simply abandoned this land as uneconomic, it was used to prove that the latifondi existed by nature and historical necessity.<sup>4</sup> The wealthier landowners were then able to take over these abandoned lots and use them to make their existing estates still more extensive.<sup>5</sup>

A far more substantial windfall for the landed interest was the

pp. 139-42. G. Scichilone, *Documenti sulle condizioni della Sicilia dal 1860 al 1870*, Rome, 1952, pp. 64, 96. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. iii, pp. 257-8; pt. iv, pp. 515, 532, for the way local authorities held up public education. Sonnino, 'the peasants are prevented from voting on the grounds that they are illiterate, and they will remain illiterate until they obtain political influence by being allowed to vote', 4 July 1890, *Atti parlamentari*, p. 4914. F. S. Nitti, *I dazi di consumo in Italia* (article of 30 Dec. 1893), in Nitti, *Scritti sulla questione meridionale*, ed. Saitta, Bari, 1958, pp. 500-2.

<sup>1</sup> Cordova, in Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, p. 103, 'it is useless to think that the municipal authorities, who are now all appointed by election, can or with the present laws even want to dissolve the promiscuous rights, or to distribute the lands which they themselves have taken illegally and enjoyed for the last 70 years'. Pupillo-Baresi, *Gli usi civici*, pp. 93-94. Professor Carnevale's memorandum in Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 266-73, 310-13; and also *ibid.*, pt. iii, p. 354. Still in 1914 a government spokesman, while recognizing the 'urgency' of this problem, was waiting for the report of a committee before he could decide whether to enforce the law; *Atti parlamentari*, 10 Feb. 1914, p. 1002.

<sup>2</sup> Scichilone (for 1865), *Documenti*, p. 168. *Nuova Antologia*, Florence, vol. cxxxix, Feb. 1895, p. 683. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 222-3, 287; pt. iii, p. 417.

<sup>3</sup> S. Riccobono, *La colonizzazione interna della Sicilia*, paper read to *Congresso agrario siciliano* in Palermo, Sept. 1918, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Sonnino, *Atti parlamentari*, 4 July 1890, pp. 4912-13. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 222-3, 279, 313-14; pt. iii, p. 355.

<sup>5</sup> Franchetti, *Condizioni politiche*, pp. 334-5. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, p. 38. Evidence from Nicosia, in Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 835. Di San Giuliano, *Atti parlamentari*, 27 Feb. 1894, p. 6749, and also pp. 6745-7 for examples of local gerrymandering. N. Colajanni, *ibid.*, 4 July 1896, p. 7150; and 18 Dec. 1912, p. 22496.

Church lands. These covered as much as a tenth of Sicily, most of it owned by forty bishoprics and abbeys. In the 1860's the Government confiscated half a million acres of ecclesiastical property in the island.<sup>1</sup> The radicals would have liked to distribute this enormous area free to alter the balance of ownership and result in a more economic use of the land. But the Government needed the money, and also needed the votes of that 2 per cent. electorate. So the Church lands were publicly auctioned to the highest bidder. Local pressure was sometimes used to make the lots too large even for the better-off peasants to buy. The auctions were often controlled by rings who divided the profits later in a secret auction of their own. Failing that, there were always violence and the mafia to prevent free bidding.<sup>2</sup> The official statistics said that 20,000 new small holdings were created and a new deal begun in Sicilian agriculture; but this was untrue. Some of the land certainly came into the hands of a new middle class element—the radical leader, Crispi, was one buyer.<sup>3</sup> Some of it was certainly improved. But most was simply tacked on to estates which were already too large for efficiency and were a byword for bad husbandry.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes a hundred lots were bought illegally by one man.<sup>5</sup> The Government lost by this transaction, because so much land thrown suddenly on the market and in rigged auctions meant absurdly cheap prices, sometimes as little as one year's rent.<sup>6</sup> Sicily lost even more. Not only had ecclesiastical charities been the only serious form of social security, but this sale meant a huge drain of capital from the island. Agriculture lost in particular, since money was diverted to purchasing land instead of being used in the public interest for improving production. Only the landowners and speculators gained, and their gains were enormous. But a further chance to

<sup>1</sup> The director of this operation was Professor Corleo, and his account of it is in *Giornale di scienze naturali ed economiche*, Palermo, vol. vii, 1871, pp. 9–164; and vol. viii, 1872, pp. 9–112. S. F. Romano, *Momenti del risorgimento in Sicilia*, pp. 234–44.

<sup>2</sup> G. Cerrito, *La questione della liquidazione dell'asse ecclesiastico in Sicilia*, in *Rassegna Storica del Risorgimento*, vol. xliii, 1956, pp. 275–8. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. iii, p. 640.

<sup>3</sup> Document quoted by Renda, *Movimento operaio*, 1955, pp. 624–5.

<sup>4</sup> Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia*, pp. 213–15. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, p. 171. L. Luzzatti, *I problemi della terra*, Bologna, 1933, p. 17. Luzzatti, *Memorie tratte dal carteggio e da altri documenti*, Bologna, 1935, vol. ii, p. 404.

<sup>5</sup> Figures from G. C. Bertozzi, *Annali di Statistica*, Rome, 1879, quoted by F. Brancato, *Nuovi Quaderni del Meridione*, Palermo, 1964, vol. v, pp. 40–41.

<sup>6</sup> G. Valenti, *L'Italia agricola dal 1861 al 1911*, in *Cinquanta anni di storia italiana*, Rome, 1911, vol. ii, book VII, p. 54.

make agriculture substantially more profitable and to diminish revolutionary tensions had been missed. From now onwards it was to become ever clearer that merely to divide the large estates would be self-defeating unless at the same time agricultural methods and an archaic social system could be radically transformed.

Some of the evidence for all this comes from a series of detailed official reports which began to appear when the Palermo revolution of 1866 and the terroristic activities of the mafia startled the rest of Italy into seeing that all was not well. These reports were written mainly by landowners and agronomists, many of them non-Sicilians with no axe to grind, and so for the first time the chief problem of Sicily was documented and analysed in depth. Usually the reports were debated in parliament, but the debates were sometimes very poorly attended, and as they were never followed by serious action there was a suspicion that they had been intended not to solve the problem but to bury it.<sup>1</sup> Northern politicians were greatly alarmed at the tremendous indignation aroused in Sicily by outside criticism, and once again the dependence of the Government on Sicilian votes stopped any fundamental reform. It was in any case difficult for these outside investigators to obtain enough accurate information in Sicily from a suspicious population which was easily terrified into silence.<sup>2</sup>

A first commission headed by Professor Pisanelli in 1867 spent only a few days in Sicily, with limited terms of reference, and hardly had time to understand even the more superficial aspects of the Sicilian problem. Then in 1875 the Bonfadini committee made another short survey; this committee included several strong champions of the Sicilian landowners, and as they relied almost exclusively for information on their friends among the local notabili there was evidently not much intention of making any fundamental analysis. Even Bonfadini's report, however, had critical things to say about the latifondi while accepting

<sup>1</sup> A. di Rudini, *Atti parlamentari*, 25 Jan. 1877, p. 855. G. Colonna di Cesarò, *ibid.*, 27 Jan. 1877, p. 924. N. Colajanni, *ibid.*, 14 Mar. 1910, pp. 6060-1.

<sup>2</sup> Ed. Jacini, *Atti della giunta per l'inchiesta agraria*, 1881, vol. i, pt. i, pp. 43-44; vol. xiii, pt. i, pp. 3-5. Only a quarter of the latifondisti answered Lorenzoni's questionnaire, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. i, p. xxvi; pt. ii, p. 365. The extraordinary touchiness of Sicilians was strikingly shown during the trials of the Sicilian deputies, Nasi and Palizzolo. Indignant reactions to Franchetti's report are quoted by R. de Mattei, in *Studi politici*, Florence, Jan. 1957, pp. 108-9.

them as difficult to replace.<sup>1</sup> The far more thorough and detailed Damiani inquiry of 1885 admitted in theory that large ranches were not necessarily bad, but in fact could find only a handful of resident proprietors, while the great majority lived far away and did not put even a fraction of their income back into the land. Were it not for this, three times the present amount of wheat could be produced on the latifondi or the land could be used for other much more rewarding crops. Wasteful methods of farming not only made capital accumulation impossible, but were causing quite unnecessary unemployment and were rapidly turning fertile land into a desert. Damiani thought that it was chiefly the selfishness, inertia, and lack of intelligence of the landowners which was to blame for this.<sup>2</sup> The number of small holdings was not increasing but in fact decreasing in the 1880's.<sup>3</sup> Luckily for Sicily the peasants worked tremendously hard, but their condition of life was unspeakable and they were often treated even worse than animals.<sup>4</sup> In most respects the interior of Sicily seemed to have changed not at all from what Balsamo had described a century earlier.

The Lorenzoni report published in 1910 was the most detailed of all. Sicily was here described as still a feudal society. The old feudal aristocracy still owned most of the large estates and it was these latifondi which set the tone and created the habits of life which kept the country poor and backward. The landowning class as a whole unfortunately conceived it as their interest to retard development and were not above using private armies of gunmen to prevent change.<sup>5</sup> A dozen latifondisti were singled out as going against the general trend and as having demolished the old myth of the unchanging latifondi. Nevertheless, absenteeism continued to be the rule among both the owners and the gabelloti who rented and managed these large estates. Leases were still almost never longer than six years despite a century of criticism, and the peasants were not uncommonly still treated

<sup>1</sup> R. Bonfadini, *Relazione della giunta per l'inchiesta sulle condizioni della Sicilia*, Rome, 1876, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, pp. 171-8. Damiani headed the subcommittee responsible for the volumes on Sicily of the monumental Jacini investigation of Italian agriculture.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 177. F. Brancato, *La Sicilia nel primo ventennio del regno d'Italia*, Bologna, 1956, p. 382.

<sup>4</sup> Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, pp. 37-38; pt. iv, pp. 414-16.

<sup>5</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 206, 232-4; pt. iii, pp. 89, 437-8; pt. v, p. 853. These were the volumes on Sicily of the Faina investigation into southern Italy.

as slaves. A real class of peasant proprietors or leaseholders did not exist even after so many laws since 1789 had done their best to create one.<sup>1</sup>

And yet by 1910 Lorenzoni and his committee found signs of a change which had been barely perceptible twenty-five years earlier: at long last, quite irrespective of legislation, despite the immobilism of society and the unwillingness of both landowners and peasants to change, the latifondi were becoming smaller and fewer. It was clearly stated in this authoritative report that the arguments were wrong which held them to be an unavoidable consequence of physical conditions. Intensive cultivation was being introduced even in some of the least likely and most barren areas, and the development of this process was once again and vigorously stated to be a necessary condition of progress. Without it Sicily would fall increasingly behind other areas of the Mediterranean, especially now that the countries of North Africa with government help and new techniques of irrigation were beginning to show promise of dynamic change.<sup>2</sup>

The Damiani and Lorenzoni reports, supported as they were by the private inquiries of two distinguished Tuscan sociologists, Baron Sonnino and Baron Franchetti, differed in emphasis, but they helped to clear away many illusions and to create something like a consensus of view. They were assisted in this by the work of individual Sicilians ranging from the socialist De Felice-Giuffrida and the radical Colajanni to the priest Don Sturzo and the conservative politician (and absentee landlord) Di San Giuliano. At last these men were clarifying the basic facts on which policy could be based, and at last some signs of change were introducing a new note of hope. One fact which received general confirmation was that at most only about one landowner in twenty was putting any significant amount of money into agricultural improvements; and after all this long time there was surely little possibility that such a proportion would increase. One hopeful alternative to them was peasant co-operatives, but until these had proved themselves there was broad agreement that the chief hope for the future was in making small holdings more numerous and more viable.

The case against small holdings was that people had tried often to introduce them but without success. Where the common

<sup>1</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 169, 868; pt. iii, pp. 3, 22, 345.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. ii, pp. 156, 394-6. Colajanni, *Atti parlamentari*, 3 Apr. 1909, p. 269.

lands had been divided into small lots, this had sometimes led to an even greater exploitation of the land than before, or else the peasants had been unable to cultivate without borrowing at usury and ultimately had been forced to sell out. Occasionally they had agitated for the land simply so that they might sell it for some quick cash.<sup>1</sup> Dividing the land thus led on the one hand to a reconstitution of the latifondi and their transference to middle class from feudal possession. On the other hand, owing partly to the new laws of inheritance and the habit among poorer Sicilians of dividing even tiny properties between children, it also led to excessive fractionalization of landownership. Any further division of land always carried the possibility of making this worse.<sup>2</sup>

These arguments were balanced by others in favour of small holdings. If the peasants had sold some of their quotas, this was not out of improvidence, but because they had been given poor land with no help to cultivate it, and perhaps with the deliberate intention of proving that a division of the latifondi was impossible.<sup>3</sup> What also had to be remembered was that often they had held on to small patches of land through the most difficult economic times, and by sheer hard work had shown that even in barren territory they could greatly increase wheat production or better still abandon cereals for more intensive cultivation.<sup>4</sup> Also by emigrating to Tunisia where the restrictive practices of

<sup>1</sup> G. Fortunato and N. Colajanni, *Atti parlamentari*, 4 July 1896, p. 7150. L. Einaudi, *La terra ai contadini* (29 Apr. 1921), in *Cronache economiche e politiche di un trentennio*, vol. vi, Turin, 1963, p. 138. G. Valenti, *L'Italia agricola*, pp. 104-5. T. Mercadante Carrara, *La delinquenza in Sicilia*, Palermo, 1911, p. 45. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, p. 63. M. Basile, *Latifondi e poderi*, Messina, 1898, pp. 51, 110. G. Molè, *La terra ai contadini e il problema della piccola proprietà coltivatrice*, Rome, 1924, pp. 23-24 (extract from *Critica Fascista*).

<sup>2</sup> Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, p. 78. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 874. *British Parliamentary Papers, Foreign Office*, 1891, no. 813, pp. 7-9. V. Gayda, *Problemi siciliani*, Rome, 1937, p. 50. The best reasoned explanation of the inevitableness of the latifondi came in a moment of pessimism from one of the best Sicilian landlords, di Rudinì, *Terre incolte e latifondi*, in *Giornale degli Economisti*, Feb. 1895, pp. 141-231.

<sup>3</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 222. Riccobono, *Colonizzazione interna*, p. 82. A. Di San Giuliano, *Le condizioni presenti della Sicilia*, Milan, 1894, pp. 142-3.

<sup>4</sup> Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia*, pp. 51, 115. *Relazione della commissione per l'inchiesta della città e provincia di Palermo*, in *Atti parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, Documenti*, no. cxi, 1867, p. 4. Di San Giuliano, *Condizioni presenti*, pp. 138-43. Riccobono, *Colonizzazione interna*, pp. 64-65, 83-84. Molè, *La terra ai contadini*, p. 17.

the Sicilian latifondi did not apply, they showed how labour even without much capital could transform the desert into productive land.<sup>1</sup> Those who disapproved of small holdings omitted to notice that the latifondi themselves were in fact cultivated in this very same way by being subcontracted annually in tiny lots,<sup>2</sup> and that the reforms now demanded merely aimed to give such a security of tenure in these existing lots that a tenant would be encouraged to improve and not just ravage the soil. There was plenty of proof by now, especially in eastern Sicily, that while some proprietors were ruining both themselves and their tenants by refusing to allow more intensive production, others by the grant of longer leases and compensation for improvements were tripling their own income and greatly diminishing the revolutionary feelings which were such a danger elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Land hunger over most of the west and central provinces, despite repeated disillusionment with division of the large estates bringing no practical gain, was still far too dangerous a force to be explained away by calling it 'uneconomic'. In any case the existing agricultural contracts were equally uneconomic, since they were a bar to increased production, and the gabelloti with few exceptions deliberately kept the land under-capitalized.<sup>4</sup> Instead of helping with cheap agricultural credit, the landowners and gabelloti preferred to invest in fixed interest securities for a small but sure return. Often they had improperly appropriated to their own use the charitable monti frumentari and the credit facilities of the Bank of Sicily which had been instituted to help poorer farmers.<sup>5</sup> They then lent usuriously to their tenants at rates up

<sup>1</sup> Colajanni, *Atti parlamentari*, 3 Apr. 1903, p. 269. E. Vassallo, *ibid.*, 5 May 1922, p. 4063. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. i, p. xxi; pt. v, p. 746.

<sup>2</sup> V. Passalacqua, *I provvedimenti agrarii per la Sicilia e il progetto Crispi*, Catania, 1894, p. 49. The latifondi were worked not usually by day labourers, but by sharecroppers with a real tenancy even if a precarious one, Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. iii, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> C. Baer, *Il latifondo in Sicilia*, in *Nuova Antologia*, vol. lxxvii, Apr. 1883, pp. 645-7. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, pp. 170-1. *British Parliamentary Papers, Foreign Office*, 1895, no. 1544, pp. 24-25. N. Colajanni, *In Sicilia: gli avvenimenti e le cause*, Palermo, 1894, pp. 61-62. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 220, 330-1, 840. G. Giolitti, *Atti parlamentari*, 28 May 1902, p. 2180. Di Sant' Onofrio, *ibid.*, 23 June 1906, p. 8991.

<sup>4</sup> Bonfadini, *Relazione della giunta*, p. 15. G. Alongi, *La mafia nei suoi fattori*, p. 27. Villari, *Scritti sulla questione sociale*, pp. 52-53. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, p. 51. Renda, *Il movimento contadino*, p. 166. F. Brancato, in *Nuovi Quaderni del Meridione*, Jan. 1964, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> F. Lacava, *Atti parlamentari*, 5 June 1902, p. 2459. C. C. Moncada, *Sullo stato attuale della popolazione rurale della Sicilia*, Palermo, 1894, p. 73. Di San

to 100 per cent.—Lorenzoni quotes figures of 400 and even of 1,000 per cent.<sup>1</sup> No wonder, then, that small holdings could disappear so quickly.

Nevertheless, to this extent the problem, while appalling, was less intractable than interested propagandists had been trying to pretend. Some quite small changes, for example longer contracts and cheaper credit, would bring a great improvement. It was easy to exaggerate both the amount of capital and the structural alterations needed to make the land more profitable.<sup>2</sup> Sonnino, who was himself a conservative as well as an experienced agriculturist, thought that as much as three-quarters of the large estates should be split up, and that a much greater variety of crops could then be grown on them.<sup>3</sup> Time, indeed, was revealing that the latifondi were far more open to change than were the latifondisti, and this fact was to show the whole problem in an altogether new light. These latifondisti and the middle-class landowners who copied them evidently put status before economics. They had little idea of public welfare and only a very short-sighted view of their own. For purely status reasons they preferred to buy more land rather than improve what they already possessed. They themselves would not work even when in real penury, yet they feared to lose caste by selling land to a genuine cultivator of the soil.<sup>4</sup> Some people now began to say that in the public interest the Government should intervene and force them to mend their ways.

One of the arguments against reform was that the latifondi were kept in being by forces of nature which no government could alter, above all by low rainfall which made intensive farming

Giuliano, *Le condizioni presenti*, pp. 93–95. Luzzatti, *I problemi della terra*, pp. 414, 418. L. Granone, *Fattori e bisogni dell'economia siciliana*, Girgenti, 1917, pp. 199–202. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 882. Most of the monti frumentari had been already taken over before 1860, so Garibaldi's Minister of the Interior wrote on 10 Oct. 1860, *Archivio di Stato*, Palermo, busta 1589.

<sup>1</sup> Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. iv, p. 416. Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia*, pp. 72, 135–6, 258–91. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 708–9; pt. iii, pp. 382, 384, 410. Sometimes the peasants were forced by contract not to borrow except from their employers.

<sup>2</sup> Baer, *Nuova Antologia*, vol. lxxvii, Apr. 1883, p. 655. Marquis Di Sant'Onofrio, 11 June 1894, *Atti parlamentari*, p. 10060.

<sup>3</sup> Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia*, p. 278.

<sup>4</sup> M. Vaccaro, *Atti parlamentari*, 10 May 1911, p. 13823. G. Bruccoleri, *La Sicilia di oggi, appunti economici*, Rome, 1913, p. 29. Caruso, *Studi sulla industria dei cereali in Sicilia*, 1870, p. 36. Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia*, p. 134. Vaina, *Popolarismo e nasismo*, p. 13. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 207, 235.

impossible. We still know too little about Sicilian climatic history, about the disappearance of the forests and its effect on temperature and rainfall. Probably the climate has changed even over the past century<sup>1</sup>—snow used to be a lucrative Sicilian export. Which forests disappeared when is still not clear, though much of the damage must have been done since 1500. One cause of deafforestation (especially near the coast) was shipbuilding.<sup>2</sup> Another was the fact that wood was the only available fuel. The refining of cane sugar in the later Middle Ages had been an important Sicilian industry and consumed so much wood fuel in Palermo that special traffic regulations had been necessary.<sup>3</sup> Sulphur smelting in later times was another heavy consumer until there were no trees left near the mines and half the sulphur itself had to be burnt in order to smelt the rest. By the 1820's wood was having to be imported in considerable quantities.<sup>4</sup> Much of the damage had been done by burning the forests, either to destroy brigands,<sup>5</sup> or accidentally by the charcoal burners,<sup>6</sup> or as a method of mafia revenge.<sup>7</sup> The regular practice of burning the stubble each August was also most dangerous.<sup>8</sup> Most of all, however, the burning of scrub and woodland was to clear new land whenever high wheat prices made this profitable.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Report by a forestry commissioner to the Faina commission, in Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 157–8.

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin, *An Essay on Sicilian Industry*, 1836, British Museum MS. 42152, pp. 73–74, 'timber for ship building is particularly scarce and the landlords are debarred from raising it by an ancient but impolitic regulation that all trees for this purpose of a certain size shall be placed at the King's disposal and that without the royal sanction none shall be cut down or exported'.

<sup>3</sup> C. Trasselli, *Producción y comercio de azúcar en Sicilia del siglo XIII al XIX*, in *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, Havana, vol. lxxii, 1957, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> Consul Lindemann from Palermo, 16 May 1822, *Public Record Office*, London, F.O. 70/98. Goodwin, British Museum MS. 42152, p. 74. Also see Marchese di Villabianca, *Diario palermitano*, ed. Di Marzo, *Biblioteca storica*, vol. xvii, 1874, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Report by the Viceroy Juan de Vega, 1547, *Papeles de estado*, Simancas MS. 1118, no. 30.

<sup>6</sup> *Annals of Agriculture*, ed. Arthur Young, vol. xxxix, 1803, p. 464.

<sup>7</sup> Franchetti, *Condizioni politiche*, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Catechismo di agricoltura per la Sicilia compilato per ordine del governo*, Palermo, 1836, p. 11 (anonymous, but in fact written by Professor Sanfilippo). Consul Goodwin, 'trenches are dug round the fields to prevent too extensive a conflagration, notwithstanding which precaution accidental damages are frequent and serious' (1836), British Museum MS. 42152, p. 35. Duca di Carcaci, *Descrizione di Catania*, Catania, 1841, p. 266. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> D. V. Auria, *Diario delle cose occorse nella città di Palermo e nel regno di Sicilia* (for 1646), ed. Di Marzo, *Biblioteca storica*, vol. iii, Palermo, 1869, p. 35. And

Such was the uneconomic cultivation of the latifondi that cereals were grown on them at altitudes as high as 4,000 feet where the yield could be less than two bushels for every one sown,<sup>1</sup> and it was here in the mountains that soil erosion on newly cleared land was quite impossible to control. Several years of good harvests could be obtained from virgin soil on the mountainsides, but by the fourth year cultivation was often abandoned as no longer profitable. Since virtually the only animal husbandry was nomadic, wandering animals then prevented woodland growing again where it had once been destroyed, and the goat-herds above all were a law to themselves, fighting a bitter and destructive war of retreat against the spread of settled agriculture.<sup>2</sup> This deafforestation had as its direct result that springs dried up and vast areas were lost to agriculture as dust-bowl conditions spread.<sup>3</sup> Forest laws to stop this (there was one as early as 1826) were quite unenforceable, since they demanded more efficiency than any government possessed, and more community sense and less avarice than could be expected from the latifondisti and their shepherds.<sup>4</sup>

This process of desiccation and soil exhaustion is beyond dispute and the further it went the more it provided a plausible explanation of why wheat farming and the latifondi were so hard to alter. Yet one flaw in the argument was pointed out as soon as experts began to study the evidence. Sicily did not in fact lack water so much as lack the ability to use what it possessed. There was undeniably a long period of summer drought, but more rain fell there over the whole year than in some much more productive areas of the world, and indeed the upland country of the latifondi had a higher rainfall than some parts of Sicily which were intensively cultivated.<sup>5</sup> It was pointed out that the Arabs, who had learnt in Africa the value of water and how to use it,

(for 1657) *Biblioteca storica*, vol. v, 1870, p. 52. Afán de Rivera, *Considerazioni su i mezzi* (1832), vol. i, p. 23.

<sup>1</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. i, p. 41; pt. iii, p. 410. Sometimes this low yield was found even in the plain; Combes de Lestrade, in *En Sicile*, ed. L. Olivier, Paris, c. 1905, p. 343.

<sup>2</sup> *Giornale di scienze, lettere ed arti*, Palermo, vol. lix, 1837, p. 61. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. iii, pp. 279–80. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 142; pt. iii, pp. 288, 306, 309.

<sup>3</sup> This was already obvious by 1844, see Baron Bivona, in *Atti dell'Accademia Gioenia di scienze naturali*, Catania, 2nd series, vol. i, 1844, pp. 77–116.

<sup>4</sup> Scichilone, *Documenti*, p. 66. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, p. 14. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 145–62.

<sup>5</sup> G. Molè, *Studio-inchiesta sui latifondi siciliani*, Rome, 1929, pp. 27, 112.

had grown cotton and irrigated crops in some of these very same areas of Sicily which were now so parched. By the early nineteenth century, when a quickly increasing population made land conservation an obviously urgent matter, it was noticed that many possible sources of irrigation were not being used at all.<sup>1</sup> When hydraulic engineers later made detailed surveys they were astonished to discover that many latifondi had easily usable springs which were simply running to waste. The engineers drew up plans for how the Government could help by constructing a dozen principal dams and many small ones, and added that this could be a highly rewarding investment.<sup>2</sup> Apart from using water more profitably, it would reduce the damage done increasingly to agricultural land and even to the main towns by floods and mountain torrents. Marshes were spreading, and because of the rapid diffusion of malaria many of the latifondi had to be completely abandoned in the summer months. Yet in the face of mounting technical evidence it became ever more difficult to maintain that these things were preordered by nature.<sup>3</sup>

The failure to control available water supplies was in fact largely due to a lack of concern for the public welfare. Unlike Naples and northern Italy where the principles of Roman law had reserved an overriding public interest in water, in Sicily the ending of feudalism had resulted not only in many common

*Nuova Antologia*, Aug. 1941, p. 378. S. Scrofani, *La questione agraria siciliana*, Rome, 1961, p. 54.

<sup>1</sup> Scinà, *Topografia di Palermo*, 1818, p. 192. Palmeri in *Giornale di scienze, lettere ed arti*, vol. xxiii, 1828, p. 288. *Ibid.*, vol. xiii, 1826, p. 301. Prince Paternò Castello, *ibid.*, vol. xiv, 1826, p. 238. Goodwin, British Museum MS. 42150, p. 24. F. Cordova, *Atti parlamentari*, 9 Dec. 1863, p. 2190. Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia*, p. 286.

<sup>2</sup> Ing. Canevari in the 1870's, Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, pp. 165-6. Ing. Travaglia and Ing. Giordano in the 1880's, *Banco di Sicilia, Bolletino mensile*, 1940, no. 1. Professor M. Basile, *Latifondi e poderi*, pp. 62-63, 72, 80-81. M. Capitò, *Acque della Sicilia e modo di accrescerle*, Palermo, 1905. N. Ziino, *L'irrigazione e i suoi effetti economici agrarii nell' Italia meridionale*, Catania, 1907. N. Colajanni, *Atti parlamentari*, 3 Apr. 1909, p. 270; and 14 Mar. 1910, p. 6057. G. Mosca, *ibid.*, 14 May 1909, p. 762. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. i, pp. 14-22; pt. ii, pp. 385-7, 632-41; pt. iii, p. 436.

<sup>3</sup> G. De Felice-Giuffrida, *Atti parlamentari*, 21 June 1896, p. 6154. Professor A. Majorana and Marquis Di Sant' Onofrio, *ibid.*, 16 Feb. 1903, pp. 5556-60. Professor A. Lunardoni, in an official publication by the Ministry of Agriculture, stressed that geologically the island was well adapted to building dams and reservoirs, *La granicoltura in Sicilia*, Rome, 1922, p. 51. G. Lorenzoni, *Trasformazione e colonizzazione del latifondo siciliano*, Florence, 1940, pp. 22-23. Scrofani, *La questione agraria*, p. 14.

lands but also in public water supplies coming into private possession. Sometimes the abolition of ancient 'promiscuous rights' was held to have put an end to public rights over water. Or sometimes a landowner went on exercising a feudal monopoly over springs and streams which his predecessors had legally or illegally acquired and which anyway had been abolished in 1812. Private and public rights had evidently not been sufficiently clarified in 1812, and it was to remain all too easy for a man of power to twist matters in his own favour. The law of Italy after 1861 said that water for irrigation could be taken off private property, but in practice possession was nine-tenths of the law, and influence in the courts had customarily made up the missing tenth.<sup>1</sup> Too many people thus gained from perpetuating the legend of Sicily's incorrigible dryness, for this helped them to keep things as they were. Too many landowners were contributing to hold up schemes of irrigation and flood control.<sup>2</sup> Scarcity made water too remunerative for it to be allowed to fall into public ownership. Instead private monopolies in its supply were created and sustained by violence. One of the chief revenues of the mafia was to come from controlling irrigation in the citrus groves where no one could afford to do without it.<sup>3</sup>

This was one way in which the criminal underworld worked together with the landed interest to preserve a backward system of agriculture. Most landlords (Franchetti said all of them) came to terms with the mafia either from choice or out of fear. They and the gabelloti needed its protection. They also needed its help in keeping social reform at bay and agricultural wages down. In return the mafia levied contributions on them and took a sizeable proportion of agricultural profits for itself. This was a main reason why Sicilian farm produce was too expensive. But an even more harmful result was that the mafia had an interest to prevent change, to leave the countryside depopulated, to stop

<sup>1</sup> Cordova, *Atti parlamentari*, 9 Dec. 1863, pp. 2190-1. Bianchini, *Storia economico-civile*, vol. ii, pp. 113-14. *Annali civili del regno*, Naples, 1840, vol. xxiv, p. 24. G. Battaglia, *Studi sulla legislazione agraria in Sicilia*, Palermo, 1904, p. 89. Riccobono, *Colonizzazione interna*, 1918, pp. 53-56.

<sup>2</sup> E. Pantano, *Atti parlamentari*, 21 Mar. 1902, p. 406. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 621. G. Raffiotta, *La Sicilia nel primo ventennio del secolo XX*, Palermo, 1959, pp. 291-5.

<sup>3</sup> G. Piazza and P. Balsamo, *Sistema metrico per la Sicilia*, 1809, pp. 48-50. Marquis V. Mortillaro, *Opere*, vol. vi, Palermo, 1854, pp. 5-17, 49-54, 59-87. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. i, p. 165. S. F. Romano, *La Sicilia nell'ultimo ventennio del secolo XIX*, Palermo, 1958, pp. 117-22. Perhaps something can be read into the fact that Palizzolo was the relatore of a proposal in parliament on Palermo water supplies, *Atti parlamentari*, 11 July 1894, p. 11478.

outside interference, if necessary even to kill in order to keep Sicily feudal and impoverished. Often, too, the Government was forced to connive at this process, just because politicians felt themselves powerless and indeed often needed the mafia for its electoral support.<sup>1</sup>

Another explanation and justification of the latifondi in natural terms stressed the inaccessibility of the interior; though here too there was doubt about how far the lack of roads was owing to human error and so an excuse as much as a cause. Medieval Sicily had been criss-crossed with *trazzere* or sheep-runs, perhaps 10,000 miles of them and sometimes as much as 150 feet wide, along which the herds were driven twice a year down to the coast and back. All these had been in the public domain, and the more important were royal roads under the King's protection; but in modern times like every other public right they had been largely incorporated into private ownership until all that was left was a narrow and sometimes only notional right of way. After 1825 the Bourbons had made a serious attempt to build a main grid of roads on McAdam principles.<sup>2</sup> But by 1850 there were still some large towns which had only a mule-track connexion to the coast, and according to the British consul there was in effect a virtual gap of half its length even in the 'road' from Palermo to Messina.<sup>3</sup> Things were not all that quick to improve after 1860, for the Italian Government, basing itself much too narrowly on north Italian experience, made all except the main roads a charge on local government, and the poverty and the tax policy of Sicilian local authorities meant in consequence that almost none were built. Furthermore, as these local authorities represented only the landowners, no action was taken to recover the *trazzere*; on the contrary they continued to disappear.<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of villages remained without any roads at

<sup>1</sup> Sonnino, *I contadini di Sicilia*, pp. 89-91. Franchetti, *Condizioni politiche*, pp. 6-11, 37-60, 175-208, 352-3, 365. Bonfadini, *Relazione della giunta*, p. 142. Alongi, *La mafia*, pp. 30, 148. Mercadante Carrara, *La delinquenza*, pp. 15, 22. Bruccoleri, *La Sicilia di oggi*, pp. 41-50. Brancato, *La Sicilia nel primo ventennio*, pp. 245-6, 417.

<sup>2</sup> G. Perez, *La Sicilia e le sue strade* (published 1861), ed. C. Trasselli, Caltanissetta, 1962, pp. 60-101.

<sup>3</sup> Goodwin, report of 11 June 1856, Public Record Office, London, F.O. 70/285. Also British Museum MS. 42150, pp. 6, 14, 73.

<sup>4</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 114, 883. Even in 1914 the Government had gone no further than just to appoint a committee of inquiry on the *trazzere*, and still in 1922 this committee had not reported, *Atti parlamentari*, 2 Mar. 1914, p. 1889; and 15 May 1922, p. 4565.

all, or were connected only by precipitous mule paths which were quite impassable in bad weather—news of the King's death took several weeks to reach some areas in 1878. The Bonfadini committee tried but failed to reach the important town of Sciacca, and even Messina itself was virtually cut off from its hinterland.<sup>1</sup> Some of the latifondisti misused their influence in local government not only to enclose existing public roads but to stop new ones being built over their land, either fearing that their illegal encroachment on the trazzere would be exposed, or that the development of communications would eventually mean the end of feudal Sicily and their existing way of life.<sup>2</sup> Half a dozen landowners are known to have constructed good private roads on their own estates. Others were able to have this done for them by the perversion of public funds. A few had the idea of clubbing together to build roads which would link up their latifondi with the main grid, but again and again the inveterate distrust of one owner against another made this impossible in practice. There was always the fear that others were contributing less to or getting more from such an association.<sup>3</sup> It was the same fear which made joint stock or limited companies virtually impossible in Sicily, with stultifying results on industry and commerce.<sup>4</sup> For the same reason of mutual distrust, municipal rivalries prevented the construction even of roads which had already been approved and planned.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sant' Onofrio, *Atti parlamentari*, 13 June 1906, p. 8422. Di Stefano, *ibid.*, 21 June 1906, pp. 8833–4. Colajanni, *ibid.*, 14 Mar. 1910, p. 6060. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. i, pp. xv–xvi. Bonfadini, *Relazione della giunta*, p. 65. *Archivio Storico Messinese*, 1953, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> Bruccoleri, *La Sicilia di oggi*, pp. 39, 76; and Colajanni in the preface, p. xiii. D. Demarco, *Il crollo del regno delle Due Sicilie*, Naples, 1960, pp. 88–89. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 387.

<sup>3</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 397; pt. iii, p. 357.

<sup>4</sup> Consul Goodwin, *An Essay on Sicilian Industry*, 1836, 'another obstacle is the mutual distrust of the Sicilian capitalists. Suspicious of his countrymen, the Sicilian possessed of money shrinks from risking his capital by engaging in commercial association or entering into partnerships. The only joint stock company at present existing is that of the Reggia or the Farmers of the Customs: the only partnerships in business are such as are established between relations by blood or connections by marriage', British Museum MS. 42152, p. 89. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 194. The lack of capital, which was often held to be a natural cause of the latifondi, was not so much an absolute lack of money as a lack of the knowledge among Sicilians of how to mobilize their money through banks for productive purposes, Di San Giuliano, *Atti parlamentari*, 27 Feb. 1894, p. 6737.

<sup>5</sup> Palmeri, in *Giornale di scienze, lettere ed arti*, vol. xxvi, 1828, p. 79. Perez, *La Sicilia e le sue strade*, pp. 70–71.

Whatever the explanation, the results were crippling for agriculture. Without proper roads every commodity had to be carried on foot or mule back, even bulk cereals and crude sulphur, in many cases even water. In some cases we know that the carriers and muleteers were a powerful vested interest which helped to keep this so.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the cost of internal transport (despite the fact that nowhere was more than forty miles from the sea) could exceed production costs or the freightage from Sicily all the way to England.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes it did not pay even to collect the harvest, and always there was a lack of incentive to produce a surplus when the market was so hard to reach. Up to the First World War there were many Sicilians who had never seen a wheeled cart.<sup>3</sup> This alone would have been enough to explain why Sicily's staple product, wheat, had long since ceased to compete with that of Russia and America. Lack of roads also helps to explain why neither landowners nor peasants wanted to live on the latifondi, why artificial fertilizers were so expensive and animal manure was often burnt, why law and order were unenforceable, why farm buildings were too expensive to construct. Lorenzoni found that the latifondi were on average over six miles from the nearest houses, and this meant many hours of travel a day over difficult country. Even basic agricultural implements had to be carried all the way to work and back because of the insecurity of the countryside and the absence of farmhouses. Hence only the most primitive plough could be used; reaping over millions of acres had to be done by scythe, sowing by hand, threshing by foot.<sup>4</sup>

The Italian Government, despite many official reports, was slow to recognize the need for remedial action either in road building or more generally in agrarian reform. On the contrary, so anxious to obtain Sicilian votes and not to vex entrenched Sicilian interests were successive Governments that they often

<sup>1</sup> Evidence by La Loggia to the commission of inquiry on Sicilian industry, 23 Jan. 1873, *Giornale di Sicilia* (Palermo).

<sup>2</sup> Balsamo, *Memorie inedite* (1807), vol. ii, p. 73. Busacca (1836), quoted by Romeo, *Il risorgimento in Sicilia*, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 883-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168-70; pt. iii, pp. 23-26. Mechanized agriculture might have seemed ideally adapted to the large estates, but on the contrary no gabello with only a short lease could think of it, *ibid.*, pt. ii, p. 182. 'La charrue est celle de Cérès . . . l'appareillage est certainement biblique', said Combes de Lestrade, *En Sicile*, ed. Olivier, pp. 338-40. A. Lunardon, *La granicoltura in Sicilia*, 1922, p. 27.

seemed to make the problem yet more acute. Not only did parliament resolve the matter of Church lands and the communal domains in a way which greatly favoured the latifondisti, but northern legislation, by discouraging the Sicilian contract of enfiteusi<sup>1</sup> and allowing taxes to be weighted inequitably against the South and in particular against efficient farmers in Sicily,<sup>2</sup> rather helped to keep the large ranches in being. After 1887 the State imposed a high protective duty on imported wheat, indeed it was one of the highest in Europe, thereby acknowledging once again the great power wielded in Rome by Sicilian deputies and the latifondisti. This duty increased the cost of living for the poor, but for the rich it made destructive methods of agriculture even more profitable. What was worse, tariff reprisals by France greatly damaged those who had tried to transform the latifondi by planting vineyards, olives, and other crops for export. Italian Government policy in this way penalized progressive agriculture, and just possibly this was done on purpose, for there was a deliberate policy to cream off any surplus capital for industrializing the north Italian towns.<sup>3</sup>

Largely as a result of the consequent rise in food prices, however, in 1893 there was another peasants' revolt in Sicily, and this so shook the whole nation that in the prevailing panic half a dozen proposals for agrarian reform were at long last formulated. One of these came from the Prime Minister, the Sicilian Francesco Crispi. His main reaction to the revolt was that these social tensions were becoming a danger to national unity. He, therefore, brought up a plan which he had adumbrated some years before to create a new class of small holders who would have a material interest in stopping further revolution. His practical suggestions for reform show that at least some of the politicians knew perfectly well that certain changes should and could be effected. He wanted longer leases, a transference of land by lot, a division of both the common lands and the latifondi, the provision of cheap credit to help tenants, and the imposition of a legal duty on the more obstructive landlords to

<sup>1</sup> Sonnino, *Atti parlamentari*, 4 July 1890, p. 4921; and 13 Dec. 1900, p. 1476. Di San Giuliano, *Le condizioni presenti*, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia*, pp. 227-36. Franchetti, *Condizioni politiche*, p. 422. Di Sant' Onofrio, *Atti parlamentari*, 11 June 1894, p. 10061; and 13 June 1906, pp. 8416-20. Sciacca della Scala, *ibid.*, 4 July 1896, p. 7159. A. Engel, *ibid.*, 25 Feb. 1898, p. 4764. L. Fulci, *ibid.*, 25 Feb. 1898, p. 4767.

<sup>3</sup> R. Romeo, *Risorgimento e capitalismo*, Bari, 1959, pp. 193-202. L. Izzo, *Vicende della politica commerciale italo-francese dal 1860 al 1892*, in *Rassegna Storica del Risorgimento*, vol. xlv, 1957, p. 407.

improve their land. He also asked for compulsory powers to expropriate portions of the latifondi if their owners would not cooperate.<sup>1</sup> This last suggestion, however, was much in advance of its time. Possibly none of Crispi's reforms were put forward with any serious hope of being accepted. Apparently his proposed law was not first discussed in cabinet, and certainly it was never allowed to reach the floor of the House. Tremendous opposition had been aroused in Sicily and it was condemned by almost all Sicilian politicians<sup>2</sup>—this fact was the clearest proof that the latifondi could never be reformed from within by their owners. Perhaps in any case the proposal had been no more than a parliamentary manoeuvre to take attention from the bank scandals and Crispi's colonial policy.

Where politicians failed, or did not even try, the common people on their own were to succeed at least in part especially after the revolt of 1893 taught them their strength. One effect of this self-confidence was that more opposition deputies were returned to parliament. Sicilian socialists even formulated a programme for nationalizing the land.<sup>3</sup> More immediately effective were agricultural strikes for better contracts.<sup>4</sup> One sign of the fear this aroused was that for a long time after 1893 the Sicilian deputies were asking the Government to use troops to stop unrest among the village populations;<sup>5</sup> and almost as important was that the Government usually refused. Meanwhile a few peasant co-operatives were being formed, at first for pooling animals in a common herd, and later for cutting out the gabello and renting a latifondo directly from a landlord. One of the first and most successful of these co-operatives was set up at Caltagirone by the mayor, Don Sturzo. Naturally there was

<sup>1</sup> C. Ruini, *Le vicende del latifondo siciliano*, Florence, 1946, pp. 115–17. V. Passalacqua, *I provvedimenti agrarii per la Sicilia*, pp. 15–50. Jessie White Mario, in the *Nuova Antologia*, Aug. 1894, pp. 724–36.

<sup>2</sup> Farini, *Diario di fine secolo*, ed. Morelli, vol. i, pp. 549, 563, 634, 772. Colajanni, *Gli avvenimenti di Sicilia e le loro cause*, 1896 ed., p. 481.

<sup>3</sup> S. Cammareri Scurti, *La lotta di classe in Sicilia*, Milan, 1896, p. 20. *I socialisti al commissario civile per la Sicilia, memorandum*, Palermo, 1896 June, pp. 13–17.

<sup>4</sup> Bonfadini, *Relazione della giunta*, p. 49. Sonnino, *I contadini in Sicilia* (for 1875), pp. 316–17, 322–5, 335. Damiani, *Inchiesta agraria*, pt. iii, p. 642 (c. 1884). And for 1901, *Quarant'anni di politica italiana, dalle carte di Giovanni Giolitti*, Milan, 1962, vol. ii, ed. G. Carocci, p. 123.

<sup>5</sup> Libertini Gesualdo, *Atti parlamentari*, 19 Mar. 1902, p. 298, for Catania. Others on 16 and 19 May 1904 were asking for troops in Caltagirone and Alcamo, *ibid.*, pp. 12564, 12916.

strong opposition from the gabelloti and the mafia. Sometimes, moreover, the co-operatives were run inefficiently and by people whose prime interest was in money or politics. Not least there was always a difficulty in persuading such a secretive and mistrustful people to work together.<sup>1</sup> Yet by 1913 a great deal had been done especially in providing cheaper co-operative credit, also in teaching the use of phosphates and a better rotation of crops to end the waste years when the land lay fallow. At least one co-operative had bought a threshing machine, though the peasants either would not or did not know how to use it. The Minister of Agriculture at all events admitted that large areas of land were being transformed by co-operative work.<sup>2</sup>

Of even greater importance was the fact that between 1901 and 1913 a million Sicilians emigrated.<sup>3</sup> This was one of the most prodigious events in all Sicilian history, and of course its most immediate impact was on agriculture. These emigrants comprised a good quarter of the active male population and almost all were farm labourers. Very soon the latifondi were experiencing a severe shortage of labour, and by 1906 there was talk of having to go cap in hand to beg workers to help in the fields.<sup>4</sup> At long last the large and middling landowners had a real incentive to give up a type of agriculture which flourished on unemployment and led necessarily to soil impoverishment and erosion. Marginal land was no longer profitable when wages rose; hence much of it was now allowed to go back from wheat to pasture and woodland, greatly to the gain of the community.<sup>5</sup> Production just had to become more intensive if standards of living were to be maintained. Landowners therefore had to reside more often and manage their estates without a gabelloto. At last they had a reason for giving up the habit of short leases, and for making special contractual provision instead to encourage

<sup>1</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 75, 205, 212; pt. iii, p. 441. At Villalba, the Catholic co-operative was employing a certain Calogero Vizzini in its campaign to replace the gabelloti, *ibid.*, pt. ii, p. 717. Before very long Vizzini was himself a gabelloto of immense wealth and the most famous mafia leader perhaps of all time.

<sup>2</sup> F. S. Nitti, *Atti parlamentari*, 29 Mar. 1912, pp. 18725-6. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 844; pt. iii, p. 357. Scrofani, *La questione agraria siciliana*, 1961, pp. 83-84. N. Prestianni, *La co-operazione agricola in Sicilia*, in *Scritti in onore di Enrico La Loggia*, Palermo, 1954, p. 427.

<sup>3</sup> Svimez, *Un secolo di statistiche italiane, nord e sud, 1861-1961*, Rome, 1961, p. 123. Sartorius von Waltershausen, *Die sizilianische Agrarverfassung und ihre Wandlungen*, Leipzig, 1913, p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> Libertini Gesualdo, *Atti parlamentari*, 23 June 1906, p. 8992.

<sup>5</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 127, 407.

improvements (contratto di miglioria).<sup>1</sup> In some cases as a last resort they were even forced to sell land. Mineral fertilizers, which in 1903 had been used only (it was said) by two progressive landowners, were by 1909 altering the whole pattern of agriculture.<sup>2</sup> Tomatoes and many other vegetables were by then being grown on the ex-latifondi.<sup>3</sup> Once the peasants had security of tenure, some of them discovered new sources of water for irrigation.<sup>4</sup> They were now, often for the first time, ready to send their children to school, either to qualify more easily for emigration, or simply to be able to correspond with their families overseas<sup>5</sup>—education was a main enemy of the latifondisti, and not without reason had they reacted against the revolt of 1893 by formally demanding less education for the masses. A great quantity of money was soon being remitted back from relatives in America, and so for the first time in centuries there was new capital for agriculture.<sup>6</sup> Or else the emigrants returned home themselves with sufficient savings to buy the social position which only land could confer. Often, of course, this fractionalization of property once again brought problems of its own, but in general Sicily gained a great deal just because ownership or a long lease gave a much greater incentive to hard work.

These changes were the more effective for being spontaneous and relying hardly at all on government action. A well-intentioned but half-hearted law in 1906 touched only the fringe of the problem. The Lorenzoni report like its predecessors led to no legislation, and no doubt its very bulk and the complexity of the problems revealed were too intimidating to the legislators. The majority of Italian deputies still had no first-hand knowledge at all of Sicily. A series of wars after 1911 in any case left them little time to spare for domestic problems. They were forced to take the matter more seriously only when a disastrous decrease in Sicilian wheat production during the long war emergency focused national attention once again on the wasting

<sup>1</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 383-4, 396, 869.

<sup>2</sup> Prince Di Scalea, *Atti parlamentari*, 3 June 1903, pp. 8540-1. Colajanni, *ibid.*, 3 Apr. 1909, p. 269. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 124, 885. Sicily had abundant deposits of phosphates, but they were still lying undiscovered because so little had been done to look for them, and this was to remain a severe handicap on Sicilian agriculture until the 1950's.

<sup>3</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, pp. 114, 177, 188.

<sup>4</sup> Lorenzoni, *Trasformazione e colonizzazione del latifondo siciliano*, 1940, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta parlamentare*, pt. ii, p. 876; pt. iv, p. 531; pt. v, p. 850.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. v, p. 818.

asset of the latifondi;<sup>1</sup> and at the same time a considerable transference of wealth in the years 1915–19 opened up dramatic new possibilities of change.

After 1918 the soldiers returned home in militant mood with a general promise from the politicians that they would gain from new plans of land reform. Large-scale occupations took place on perhaps most of the big estates, and the Government had to legalize these retrospectively. Some of the owners and gabelotti took arms to defend their property, but many reacted by deciding to sell or rent off portions of land.<sup>2</sup> It was another moment of panic for them, because the socialists were after 1919 the largest party in parliament, and next in size were the Christian democrats who also were proposing confiscatory measures of agrarian reform. A wider suffrage meant that land distribution was now an election manifesto that could win votes. Every peasant wanted a piece of land irrespective of any possible economic return, and as a result of the war and emigration they were now able to produce vast sums of money for this purpose. Some figures suggest that the number of landowners in Sicily more than doubled by the end of 1921,<sup>3</sup> and altogether hundreds of thousands of acres were now transferred to a new class of small holders.<sup>4</sup>

This vast movement had its drawbacks, for division of the land, while it could reduce the latifondi, could not by itself destroy the type of agriculture which went with them. Many of these plots of land were far too small, and often there was little money left over once the purchase price had been paid. In the difficult years of devaluation and the great slump after 1926 some of the new owners went bankrupt. Yet compared to what had gone before, the results were good and often astonishingly good. Above all, some dangerous social tensions were diminished. Very few areas where division took place did not quickly show a

<sup>1</sup> A. Abisso, *Atti parlamentari*, 2 Mar. 1917, pp. 12378–9. Colajanni, *ibid.*, 22 Oct. 1917, p. 14859. L. Einaudi, *La condotta economica e gli effetti sociali della guerra italiana*, Bari, 1933, pp. 133–5, 184.

<sup>2</sup> A. Serpieri, *La guerra e le classi rurali italiane*, Bari, 1930, p. 210. Einaudi, *La condotta economica*, p. 294. Lorenzoni, *Trasformazione e colonizzazione*, pp. 37–42, 49. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra*, Rome, 1938, p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> A. Mariotti, *Atti parlamentari*, 4 May 1922, p. 3987. Serpieri, *La guerra e le classi rurali*, p. 371.

<sup>4</sup> G. Molè, *Studio-inchiesta sui latifondi*, 1929, pp. 20–25. N. Prestianni, *La formazione di piccole proprietà coltivatrici in Sicilia*, Rome, 1931, pp. 16–35. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà*, 1938, pp. 113–17.

marked improvement in crop production, especially where the new tenants were backed by co-operatives.<sup>1</sup> It was as though an elemental force had been released, said Professor Lorenzoni when he made a second tour of Sicily to see what changes there had been since 1910. Even where the land was really poor, even without capital, this new generation of small holders, unlike many of its predecessors, managed to survive and sometimes was able to triple the net product of agriculture.<sup>2</sup>

Once again government action played little part in this process. Several attempts were made after 1918 to pass a law to make the surviving latifondisti improve their property, and eventually in the summer of 1922 after many delays the lower house of parliament voted for this by 190 to 117. Just in time the landowning lobby then helped to put Mussolini in power and at once the bill was dropped. Fascism, being compounded of both socialist and anti-socialist elements, had no consistent view about the latifondi.<sup>3</sup> In general it was favourable to them and aimed only to make them function better. For example, by curbing the mafia and bringing relative security to the countryside, Mussolini removed a terrible incubus from agriculture. In his attempt to make Italy self-sufficient, the uneconomic wheat production of the latifondi was subsidized even more than before. At the same time laws on land reclamation and provision for roads, irrigation, drainage, and reforestation, seemed to promise a real revolution in Sicilian affairs. Yet in practice surprisingly little of positive value was actually done despite grandiose statements of intent.

A totalitarian régime showed itself in fact to be remarkably inefficient. Wheat production was greatly increased, but only by hastening the pace of soil erosion and preventing the development of a balanced agriculture.<sup>4</sup> The peasant co-operatives

<sup>1</sup> Molè, *La terra ai contadini*, 1924, pp. 28–29. Molè, *Studio-inchiesta sui latifondi*, 1929, pp. 25, 40, 43, 47, 54, 68, 128–9.

<sup>2</sup> Lorenzoni, *Dal diario di viaggio di un sociologo rurale attraverso la Sicilia*, 1933, in *Annali dell'Università di Ferrara*, 1937, vol. ii, pp. 316–17, 334. Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà*, pp. 117, 237. Lorenzoni, *Trasformazione e colonizzazione*, pp. 43, 50, 55, 57, 63, 65. Cf. D. Tosi, *Sulle forme iniziali di sviluppo economico e i loro effetti*, arguing against Professor Romeo who had suggested that the failure to develop agriculture had helped the Italian economy as a whole; *Annali del Istituto Giangiacomo Feltrinelli*, Milan, 1962, vol. iv, pp. 221–2.

<sup>3</sup> G. Acerbo, *Atti parlamentari*, 6 May 1922, pp. 4118–19. The idea of expropriating inefficient latifondisti was still being ridiculed as un-fascist at the meeting of the *Reale Accademia* on 16 June 1939.

<sup>4</sup> Gayda, *Problemi siciliani*, pp. 19, 28, 39–41, 54. Mangano, *Problemi del*

were allowed to decline along with the socialist and catholic parties which had sponsored them. Many latifondi continued as before to be quite uncultivated, as it proved hard to make either owners or farm labourers change their ways. The former all too often had no interest whatsoever in the land. The latter frequently continued to live just as before with their families and farm animals together in one-roomed huts, still largely cut off from the civilized world, still having to carry the same prehistoric plough many miles to work each day along unpaved mule tracks. Very few of the things which fascism could have done to help were in fact done. The most fundamental problem of all, that of providing water for irrigation, a problem which now presented no insuperable technical or financial difficulties, received surprisingly little attention.<sup>1</sup>

Only in the late 1930's, when international politics made the need to improve agriculture much more acute, and when Mussolini was suddenly shocked to discover how his will was being frustrated by this survival of the antiquated past, did fascism turn its attention seriously to Sicily, and even then it was more to strike an attitude than to be of practical help. Reversing his earlier decision, Mussolini now decided to 'liquidate the latifondo'. He would simply put an end to 'extensive agriculture' as something quite unfascist which could no longer be tolerated, and he brazenly announced that by doing this he would make Sicily 'one of the most fertile countries of the world'.<sup>2</sup> Vast projects of land transformation were suddenly announced, and a batch of fascist leaders went down to Sicily to watch the party secretary cut the first ceremonial furrow.<sup>3</sup> But this was all much too late. The war had already begun. In any case the plan was misconceived, for it was all made to hinge on building new

*bonificazione in Sicilia* in *Atti dell'Accademia dei Georgofili*, Florence, vol. cxii, 1934, pp. 143-54.

<sup>1</sup> Scrofani, *La questione agraria*, pp. 94-102, 260. Molè, *Studio-inchiesta*, pp. 58, 102-4. Lorenzoni, *Trasformazione e colonizzazione*, pp. 8-9, 11-12, 14. Gayda, *Problemi siciliani*, pp. 16, 21, 30, 49, 71-72, 79, 128. *Il Giornale d'Italia*, for 6 and 21 Dec. 1938, and 1 Jan. 1939. *Banco di Sicilia, Bollettino mensile*, Palermo, 1940, no. 1, p. 8. N. Prestianni, *L'economia agraria della Sicilia*, Palermo, 1946, pp. 85, 110-12.

<sup>2</sup> B. Mussolini, 19 Aug. 1937, *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, eds. E. and D. Susmel, vol. xxviii, Florence, 1959, p. 240. *Il Corriere della Sera*, 22 July 1939. F. Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche*, Milan, 1953, vol. ii, p. 341. For the continued recalcitrant immobilism of the latifondisti, see *Il sud nella storia d'Italia*, ed. R. Villari, Bari, 1961, p. 595.

<sup>3</sup> *Il Corriere della Sera*, 22 Oct. 1939.

villages in the countryside so as to settle peasants on the land. Eight such villages were in fact built, but not even Mussolini could make people go and live in them. He had fallen victim to his own illusion of omnipotence and to his predilection for propaganda over effective reforms.

After the defeat of fascism there were further invasions of the latifondi in 1944-6 which showed that land hunger still existed as a dangerous revolutionary force. To assuage these turbulent feelings, article 44 of the new Italian constitution of 1947 made the 'transformation of the latifondo' a fundamental law of the Republic. Many of the landowners themselves had by now come to accept this as inescapable. A special agricultural reform act was passed for Sicily in 1950 with powers of expropriation if landowners did not improve their farms. Many criticisms were made of this act from many quite different points of view,<sup>1</sup> but its result was virtually to put an end to the latifondi as large estates over 250 acres in size even if the old methods of agriculture lingered on. Much of the more easily transformable land had already been settled by 1950, and further reforms were going to need a greater sense of urgency and a greater tolerance of regional planning than society was yet ready to accept. Even after the defeat of malaria, after the spending of vast sums of money by the new regional Government and the Cassa del Mezzogiorno, after the building of dozens of new villages and the settlement of thousands of new families on the land, the problem of how to modernize Sicilian agriculture was still only partially solved by 1965. What had been achieved was nevertheless considerable. There was no longer a complete divorce between ownership of the land and agricultural production. Greater security of tenure meant that there was no more such a positive disincentive as formerly to investment in agricultural improvement. Hundreds of thousands of underemployed labourers had once again been compelled to take the painful course of emigration, but those who remained found plenty of examples to prove that land exhausted by thousands of years of wheat production was not condemned to sterility by unchangeable forces. Change was not

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Scrofani, *La questione agraria*, pp. 113-14, 120, 129-35, 191. M. Pantaleone, *I problemi dell'agricoltura della provincia di Palermo* (extract from *Sicilia al lavoro*, Mar. 1963), p. 2. Nicosia, *Atti parlamentari*, 29 Nov. 1962, p. 35955. A. Altavilla, in *Corriere della Sera*, 7 June 1964. Heros Cuzari, *Economia della riforma*, Rome, 1964, pp. 4, 16C-16H, 47-50. L. Tasca Bordonaro, *Elogio del latifondo Siciliano*, Palermo, 1950, pp. 12-20.

only desirable, it was sometimes easy; and not only society as a whole, but individual owners, managers, and farm labourers all had a common interest in securing it.