

The Persistence of Feudal Economic Institutions in the Agricultural Sector of 19th Century Sicily

Emilio Sereni, the well known Marxist scholar, maintains that one of the prime reasons Italy was a relative late-comer to the ranks of other European industrialized nations was the persistence of "feudal residues" in her agricultural sector, especially in the southern part of the peninsula.¹ According to Sereni, feudal residues in agriculture impeded capital accumulation and attempts to commercialize the Italian economy, both of which retarded industrial expansion. This interpretation has come under frequent attack, but no one denies that in the south, and Sicily in particular, feudal institutions continued to exist well into the 19th century.

This paper focuses on the persistence of feudal economic relations in the agricultural sector of 19th century Sicily up to the unification of Italy in 1861. It will be argued that feudal economic relations in Sicilian agriculture continued well into the 19th century because of the absence of an effectual central government. The Bourbon government which ruled Sicily for almost 200 years prior to 1861 was unable to displace the economic and political power of the landed aristocracy of the island. Each of the large landowners continued to possess a private army, while the Bourbon government undertook the protection of its citizens only after 1838. Even after unification the private armies, the embryonic stage of the Sicilian mafia, were not disbanded, posing a constant threat to the legitimacy of the Italian government.²

European feudalism arose in an atmosphere of decaying central authority, civil war, invasions and economic stagnation. It was the economic climate of Europe, however, that gave major impetus to the formation of feudal ties. With the disintegration of central government and invasions from the Arab countries, European feudalism was a way of coping with the military necessity of the time. In such a predominantly rural society in which land was the chief source of

wealth there was no means of raising funds to provide the fighting men with their livelihood and equipment except granting them land from which they could draw a rent.

Fedualism, in an economic sense, refers to the relationship which existed in the Middle Ages, especially from the 9th to the 13th century, between members of the fighting (vassals) and landowning classes.³ It consisted of a complex system of political and social obligations contingent on the possession of a fief. This was a military benefice, consisting of a parcel of land, given to a vassal for rendering a host of services to his lord, the most important of which was military service. The fief was made up of organized manors worked by peasants or slaves for the owner of the tenement. The vassal collected from them a rent, extracted labour services for his own plot of land, and recruited fighting men for his army. Further, the owner of the fief administered justice and local taxes, and extracted labour services for the upkeep of roads, bridges and fortification of the fief.

Peasants working on the manors of the fief rarely owned the land. In return for a plot of land they paid rent, usually a portion of the harvest, taxes, provided labour services for the vassal, and came under the protection of the feudal army. As we shall see later, the Sicilian *mezzadria*, a sharecropping contract, had remarkable resemblance to the implicit contract that existed on the manor between the peasantry and the vassal, and served many of the economic functions the manor did during the feudal period.

One of the main reasons that feudal institutions persisted well into the 19th century in Sicily was the Spanish domination of the island up to 1861. During the latter part of the 17th and throughout the 18th century the Spanish government's pressing fiscal needs led to the infeudation of land in Sicily.⁴ With the purchase of land from the government the buyer acquired the title of count or marquis; the right to levy taxes on the consumption of meat, wine and bread, on the baking of bread and milling of flour; extraordinary privileges, such as the administration of justice (both civil and criminal notary prerogatives), and the exclusive right to hunt on the land. The owners of the infeudated lands were also exempt from paying one-third of their tax obligation to the Spanish government. The infeudation of land naturally led to the decentralization of power as the landed nobility increased its influence over the islands political leadership.

In the late 18th century progressive laws were passed by the Sicilian parliament to curtail feudal rights. For example, from 1785 the peasants were legally allowed to sell their food surpluses to anyone they chose, or use other bakeries, besides that of their landlord, to bake their bread.⁵ These reforms were to weaken the personal bonds between a peasant and his landlord. They were not successful, however.⁶ The feudal landlords were too powerful, and the state was too weak to enforce its own laws. This weakness was due to the fact that the feudal lords (*Signori di Vassalli*) were disproportionately represented in the Sicilian parliament. Up to 1812, parliament was composed of 63 representatives of the Church, 43 representatives of the municipalities, and 228 feudal lords.⁷

In 1812, while briefly under England's rule, Lord Bentinck reformed the Sicilian parliament along British lines: two chambers, one hereditary and the other elected by property owners.⁸ With these reforms it would appear that feudalism had come to a virtual end. But as Franchetti and Sonnino, two 19th-century scholars, point out, that was not the case in practice.⁹ Most of the large landowners continued to possess an army, and social relations between peasantry and the landowning class remained of a personal and dependent nature. The dominant cultural codes were still honour and fidelity. While in the rest of Europe the old feudal establishment was crumbling, in Sicily it remained virtually intact.¹⁰

By the mid-19th century the political and economic situation had altered little. Agriculture still served largely the same role it did during the feudal period: it sustained the large landowner, his private army, and the Church. The primary agricultural institution through which this was accomplished was sharecropping, known in Sicily as *mezzadria*, or, less commonly, as *metateria*.

The *mezzadria* was by far the most common agricultural contract in Sicily throughout the 19th century. In theory this contract gave a peasant the use of a plot of land for one year for half the resulting harvest. The landowner or his administrator, known as *gabellotto*,¹¹ would lend out the initial seeds and the peasant, called a *mezzadro*, would supply his labour and all farm implements and draft animals. Although the *mezzadro* appropriated half the harvest, out of this portion he had to pay a number of different people.¹² He was obliged to contribute one-sixteenth of his share to the head

guard (*capo campiere*) of the latifundia, and a similar amount to all the other guards (*diritto di guardia*) who shared it among themselves. The guards made up the landlord's personal army, just as in the feudal period. They guarded the large estates on horseback and were armed. These feudal armies were a necessity for the protection of those working on the estates since the Bourbon government did not undertake the protection of its citizens until 1838.¹³ Even after this date, however, private armies continued to exist and were a necessity for those living or working in the countryside. The latter was sparsely populated,¹⁴ which, with a lack of central army or police force, invited criminals to roam it in search of defenseless individuals. The renowned 19th-century scholar *Pitrè*, recorded that even under escort no one set out on a trip into the interior without first making his last will and testament, having himself confessed and taking communion.¹⁵

The *mezzadro* also had to contribute one-sixteenth of his harvest share to the local priest (*diritto di Messa*), one-sixteenth to the landowner for the loss of grain in transit, and one quarter of his half as interest on the seeds the latter loaned him at the beginning of the harvest season. The *mezzadro* also contributed towards the expense of the annual feast for the local patron saint. The average *mezzadro* was left with only about a quarter of his harvest to feed himself and his family.

As in the feudal period peasants were generally obligated to perform a number of labour services for the landlord or his administrator.¹⁶ These included working on the latter's garden, repairing roads, fences, bridges and buildings on the estate. Peasants were also expected to pay homage to the landlord with gifts on religious holidays. These donations usually consisted of a few chickens or rabbits and eggs.

From the peasant's point of view the *mezzadria* was an advantageous economic contract. Once he had found a plot of land the landlord would provide an advance on the *mezzadro's* portion of the harvest to sustain the latter's family throughout the winter and spring until harvest time. As Franchetti and Sonnino point out, however, once the *mezzadro* accepted a loan from his landlord he became *ipso facto* a slave.¹⁷ Since it would be very difficult to repay the loan because the following year's harvest would be barely enough to feed his family, a dependent relationship developed between the *mezzadro*

and the landowner. Although from today's viewpoint such a dependent relationship seems coercive, the *mezzadro* generally entered the *mezzadria* contract willingly. In the absence of an effective central government that could protect and provide for the peasant and his family in times of emergencies, it was comforting to know that in time of need he could turn to his protector as he often did. In especially lean winters a peasant would often turn to his landlord for emergency loans to pay his taxes or food. The landowner would be pleased to help out this *mezzadri* since the more in debt they were to him the more difficult it would be for them to repay their debts. As a result, the landlord was sure that all those peasants indebted to him would be back to work for him the following year.

The persistence of this quasi-feudal social structure in Sicily kept agriculture in a state of backwardness compared to other areas of Europe, much as it had been in the medieval period. One of the main reasons was the almost complete absence of internal markets within the island on which food surplus could be sold by the peasantry.¹⁸ The lack of internal markets was a symptom of the ineffectual central government which could provide the appropriate infrastructure for them to function. For example, roads were few and badly maintained. Carriageable roads that crossed the island were non-existent until the late 18th century when about 250 miles were built. These poorly constructed roads fell into disuse by 1825.¹⁹ As a result of the poor communication network, many communities were completely isolated from each other, and this made trade extremely difficult. Market transactions were impeded by the lack of a unified standard of measurement. Despite the adoption of the metric code in 1809, the 48 different standards of weights and measures used throughout the island continued to exist well in the 19th century.²⁰ Moreover, the economic dependence of the *mezzadro* on his landlord made arm's length trading impossible. Any surplus the former had to put on sale would generally be purchased by the landlord whether the *mezzadro* liked it or not since he could find himself without a plot of land the following year. With such dependent social and economic relations markets cannot function.²¹ As a result, much of trading that occurred in the Sicilian economy was on the basis of barter. Economic progress in such an environment is almost impossible. The relative backwardness of agriculture coupled with a rapid population

growth was to lead to mass rural immigration in the late 19th and in the early 20th century.

Although few internal markets existed, Sicilian agriculture consistently exported wheat, beans, nuts, citrus fruit, wine and cheese to other European countries. Most of the exporting was carried out by agents of the landlords and a small group of professional entrepreneurs in Palermo. In the absence of internal markets these entrepreneurs collected agricultural commodities through an extended network of friends and contacts. This form of a distributive mechanism was a manifestation of the feudal structure which permeate Sicilian agriculture.

It is interesting to note that the sale of agricultural products did not affect the internal structure of agriculture. The *mezzadria* contract remained largely unaltered even after unification. External trade was strictly separated from the workings of the internal economy. As Sereni points out, the small entrepreneurial class in Sicily was not sufficiently powerful to influence the existing order and thus learned to function in a largely feudal economic environment.²²

This situation did not appreciably change after the unification of Italy. The political strength of the landed nobility remained intact. Senate representation from Sicily came exclusively from the ranks of large landowners. Suffrage was accorded to only property owners, about 2 percent of the population.²³ Private armies and feudal social relations remained, even if the new country had created a central army and started to build a modern infrastructure. While it would be technically incorrect to maintain that a feudal structure in agriculture remained after 1861, the dependent relationship of the peasantry on the landowning class was to continue into the 20th century. Indeed, a case can be made that remnants of feudalism have persisted to the present day in Sicily. The mafia, which as already noted had its beginnings as the large landowners' private armies, represents a countervailing centre of economic and political power to that of the Italian state, in a sense, a state within a state. Only very recently has the Italian government had success at partially ridding itself of this sub-centre of political and economic power. Given the important role of secrecy, honour and fidelity within the mafia, not to mention the brutal force to make sure these codes are followed, it is likely

that feudal residues will persist in Italy for a long time to come.

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NOTES

- 1 E. Sereni, *Il Capitalismo nelle Campagne, 1860–1900* (Torino: Einaudi, 1947), p. 30. Sereni, a Marxist scholar, attributes the persistence of the feudal residues (i.e. pockets of feudal modes of production and social relations) to the incomplete bourgeois revolution in Italy, which left the old dominant feudal landowning class with the political power to protect its interests.
- 2 While a strong central government was created with the unification of Italy in 1861 feudal economic organizations and institutions continued to exist. However, their function quickly changed. For example, the sharecropping contract exists to this day in Italy but its economic function, as will be shown, has been altered completely.
- 3 L.T. White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 6–10 and *passim*.
- 4 In 1652 Philip IV urged all states under jurisdiction, including Sicily, to: “. . . infeoder n’importe quelle terre ou bien de cet Etat, offront le titre de Marquis, de Comte Du un autre choix, au prix le plus élevé possible, meme si ce prix restait au desous de la taxe imposée jusq’alors et établié par les ordres, attendue les presentes necessites qui ne permettent aucun delai.” B. Caizzi, “La Ville et la campagne dans le systeme Fiscal de la Lombardie sous la Domination Espagnole,” in L. Febvre (ed.) *Éventail de L’Histoire Vivant* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1953), p. 369.
- 5 L. Franchetti and S. Sonnino, *Inchiesta in Sicilia* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1974), Vol. 1, p. 62.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 11 The word *gabellotto* comes from *gabella*, a tax originally collected from the *mezzadro* to pay for the services of his administrator. As the 19th century progressed in many instances the *gabellotto* leased the large estate outright from the landowner.
- 12 Franchetti and Sonnino, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 26–27.
- 13 A. Battaglia, *L’Evoluzione Sociale in Rapporto alla Società Fondiaria* (Palermo: Edizione della Regione Siciliana, 1974), p. 227. Strictly speaking feudalism came to an end at this date.
- 14 The countryside was sparsely populated because for the most part the island’s population lived in urban areas. A contemporary explained this phenomenon

by the lack of availability of water in most of the island. Thus, towns sprang up wherever water was available. A. Battaglia, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

- 15 J. Schneider and P. Schneider, *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily* (New York: Academic Press, 1976), p. 53.
- 16 The obligation of labour services differed from estate to estate, and generally was arbitrary. L. Graziani, "Patron-Client Relationship in Southern Italy," *European Journal of Political Research*, 1973, p. 9.
- 17 Franchetti and Sonnino, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 102.
- 18 Schneider and Schneider, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-104.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 20 Battaglia, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
- 21 Although internal markets were lacking, Sicily did export a number of agricultural products, among which the most important were wheat and citrus fruit. Agricultural exports were carried out by a class of rural entrepreneurs. See Schneider and Schneider, *op. cit.*, pp. 102, 104.
- 22 Sereni, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 64.