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Vincent R. Tortora

THE ITALIANS REFORM THEIR LAND TENURE SYSTEM

THE DAY was warm, but windy. Sandy soil, whipped up along a picturesque expanse of rolling terrain, pelted us sharply. A rather elderly, trim man with elegant bearing and custom-made clothes spoke above the drone of several large machines at work pulling up tree-stumps and large rocks, leveling the land, plowing the fields and mixing cement. Pointing to the skeletal forms of a cluster of buildings being constructed about a half mile away, he said, "In that very spot there used to be a wonderful grove where for generations my family went hunting for foxes."

Waving his hand in front of him in an 180-degree arc, he continued, "In fact, all this land used to belong to me. It was in my family almost from the Middle Ages." He put his hands into his trouser pockets rather abruptly, paced a few feet away, cleared his throat and said: "Land is important here in Italy. We cherish the land. It gives us a sense of security. . . . It gives us . . . status."

"Now, this land belongs to me no longer. It has been taken by the Government. As you see, they are breaking it up into plots for the people without land."

INDEED, more than 3,200 other landowners in many sections of Italy have given up portions of their land totalling about two and one-half million acres under laws passed by the Italian Government in 1948 and 1950. This initiated the largest concerted land-reform program ever undertaken by a Western nation. Most of the two and one-half million acres were then developed and reclaimed through removal of stumps and stones, irrigation, deep-plowing, contour plowing, terracing, intensive fertilization

or whatever was needed; divided into plots ranging from 5 to 123 acres; and furnished with compact houses, barns, livestock and equipment. To date, close to two million acres have already been purchased by about two hundred thousand families of unlanded agricultural workers and very small landowners.

The great Roman poet, Horace, saw fit to chide some of the more avaricious landowners of his day by saying, "Nature has appointed neither him nor me, nor anyone, lord of the land in perpetuity." And the Roman historian, Pliny, called the large Roman estates the "ruination of Italy." Since then, a succession of great leaders, writers and philosophers have expressed the admonition to society that all men are entitled to land of their own. In the comparatively recent era, Pope Leo XIII said, "Every man by his nature has the right to possess his own property."

And yet, in Italy—an overwhelmingly agricultural country—before the land-reform program was initiated, all fifty-five million acres of the privately owned arable land were divided among nine and one-half million proprietors in an acutely inequitable manner. Small proprietors, numbering about nine million, owned properties ranging from half an acre to sixty acres (the average farm in the U. S. is 242 acres), representing about thirty-four percent of the total. Large proprietors and corporations owned the rest. A group of about five hundred of the largest proprietors owned close to 2,225,000 acres, or about four percent of the total. To make the contrast in classes of land tenure all the more sharp, it must be noted that at least four million other families classified as farmers did not own a square inch of land. They subsisted entirely by renting (*affittuari*) small bits of land from the large proprietors, share-cropping (*mezzadri*), or laboring (*braccianti* and *boari*) on large farms. The most intense poverty in this, one of the poorest countries of Europe, existed and still exists among the *braccianti*.

For the most part, the large landowner of Italy has been, in the composite words of generations of Italian poets and writers, exceedingly "selfish," "unyielding" and "harsh." Modern writers

like Silone and Levi express frequent wonderment that the peasants have not risen up against them time and time again. Indeed, several years ago a band of unlanded and hungry peasants of Calabria physically assaulted land (belonging to a large proprietor) that had lain fallow for several generations and made abortive attempts to cultivate it with makeshift hoes and plows. Weakened by years of malnutrition, they lacked the strength to continue the revolt when police and soldiers descended on them. With unconcealed bitterness, they returned to their squalor.

AS SOON AS the Italian Monarchy was rejected by the people in the Plebiscite of June, 1946, it became quite clear that the large landed estate (*Latifondo*) was the next institution of long-standing to go. The *Latifondi*, after all, were the product of a monarchical, and before that feudal, government. Almost all the large landowners, or *latifondisti*, were titled barons, counts and dukes. The very life blood of their social position and wealth was their land. Yet, they took very poor care of the land. It was the rare case in which the huge expanses of the *Latifondi* were used efficiently and intelligently. More often, they were allowed to be exhausted by un-caring tenant farmers, eroded by the wind and waters or left fallow for years on end so they might be used for game preserves.

Living close to these millions of acres of relatively unproductive terrain were millions of people whose standard of living ranked among the lowest in the West.

Hence, when the Constitution of the Italian Republic was drafted and put into effect in 1948, it contained a definite reference to land tenure and promised wide-scale reformation of the large estates.

A little less than two months after the adoption of the new Constitution, Law No. 114 was passed by the Italian Parliament led by the Christian Democrat Party. Its purpose was to encourage unlanded farm workers to buy from the large proprietors the land on which they were working. In effect, the law granted

all small buyers of property the right to low-interest loans, major tax exemptions and assistance in paying interest on mortgages. Moreover, it set up revolving funds to help the new landowners form cooperatives and carry out development and reclamation programs to increase the productivity of their land.

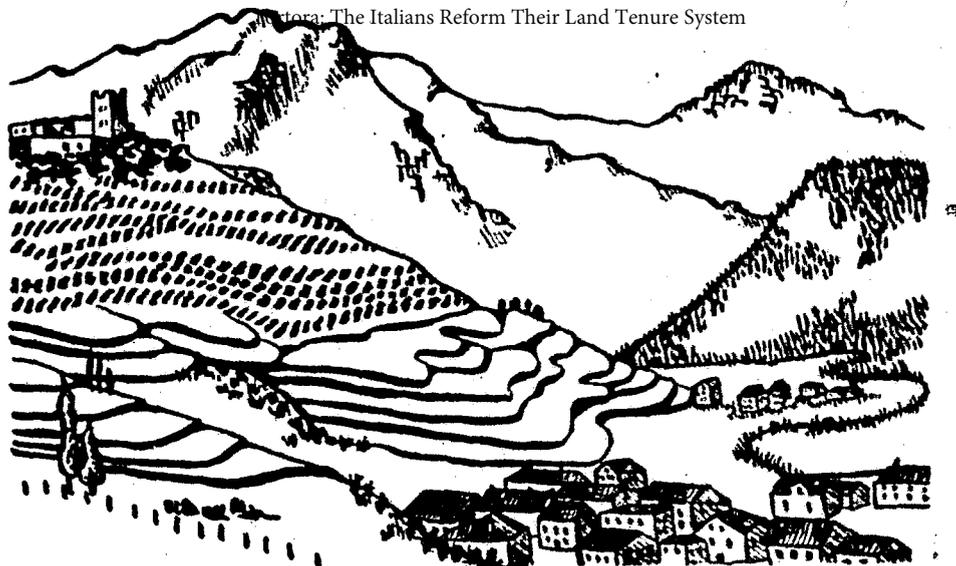
To date, through this manner of voluntary land reform, close to 900,000 acres have passed into the hands of more than 130,000 small farmers with provisions for thousands more to follow.

But, as was to be expected, not all the large proprietors were willing to sell their land. By 1950, it was evident that Law No. 114 would not radically change the Italian land tenure picture. It was, therefore, necessary to draft two new laws, the Sila Law and the Stralcio (Extract) Law, to provide for the compulsory expropriation of land from large proprietors. Also included in the laws were provisions for extensive works on the expropriated or reclaimed land and its assignation to unlanded farm workers and very small landowners.

The Sila Law was named for and dealt with the large plateau area in Calabria, at the base of the toe of the Italian boot. The Stralcio Law dealt with four other rather large specific areas in North, Central and South Italy and the Islands of Elba and Sardinia. Sicily, being semi-autonomous, passed its own similar laws.

The over-all area on which reform took place totals almost twenty million acres. But, only one and one-half million acres were actually expropriated insofar as much was exempt. Exempt land included that held by small owners; that owned by national, provincial or municipal governments; that housing or belonging to social, charitable or public betterment agencies; and, church property. Also exempt from expropriation were organic and efficiently run farms of any size that were practicing intensive cultivation and providing work possibilities and living conditions at least forty percent above the average of the area; and, farms devoted to the raising of prize livestock.

All other lands of a given owner or group of owners—in pasture, orchard, woodland, cultivation or lying fallow—were sub-



ject to expropriation if they were in excess of 750 acres in the Sila region, or, if they did not yield at least fifty dollars an acre per year in the rest of Italy.

The actual mechanics of expropriation were quite complex. Taken into consideration first of all was the income per acre of land as related to the income of the total land holdings of the particular proprietor. The result of this calculation was applied to a schedule made up according to the average production per acre in the entire area. The amount of expropriable land was then computed from another schedule.

The schedules were so formulated as to reward with a comparatively small percentage of expropriation those proprietors who had been getting good to excellent production from their land and to penalize with great expropriation those who had permitted their land to remain poorly exploited or unexploited.

In setting the amount of indemnities to be paid for expropriated lands, the Italian Government shrewdly went back to the musty, yellowed tax declarations submitted by the landowners in 1937. This was one of the years that the owners had made their own appraisals of the value of the property and paid taxes accordingly. Since few had appraised their land at its full value, the Italian Government, in one swoop, saved itself in-

demnities and administered a sharp rebuke to the Italian moneyed class for its traditional evasion of taxes. Indemnities were paid in Government Bonds at five percent which may not be redeemed for twenty-five years.

THE LAND REFORM LAWS were not easily passed through the Italian legislature. There was a great deal of opposition in the beginning and it continues to this day. The landowner class, representing a formidable factor in Italy, can bring enormous pressure to bear on its behalf. When the Sila and the Stralcio laws were being debated in the Parliament, politically powerful spokesmen for the large proprietors argued long and hard against them. As a result, a number of concessions were written into the laws. Such concessions concerned the amount and type of property to be expropriated, arrangements for heirs, and subsidies for self-development projects. Some observers contend that compromises of this type had the effect of watering down, to some degree, what might otherwise have been very effective programs.

To this day, there is pressure on the predominantly Christian Democrat Government to decelerate these programs. Part comes from the Liberal Party which, unlike that in the U. S., is oriented toward the political right and gets its support largely from landowners. It forms part of the four-party coalition, headed by the Christian Democrats, which governs Italy by a tenuous majority.

The major forces working toward the destruction or discredit of the Land Reform are the Fascist-Monarchist Coalition on the one hand and the Communist-Socialist on the other. The former contends that the Italian peasant is basically ignorant, disorganized and unfit for autonomy and that farmland suffers enormously when put in such hands. The latter contends that the peasants are all that the Fascists deny; yet, they just lack opportunity and advantage under the effete government program of Land Reform. Both extremist groups expend vast energies in attempts to weaken Land Reform and, thereby, embarrass the Christian Democrat Government.

Any lethargy or deceleration the Land Reform Programs may have suffered under previous Prime Ministers, however, is more than compensated for in the zeal of the Prime Minister, Antonio Segni. It was Segni who originally drafted the reform laws and set a fine voluntary example by breaking up his modest holdings on Sardinia in favor of the peasants who were working them. Prime Minister Segni defines land reform as a means to "elevate the farmer to the likeness of a man, enable him to regain his human dignity and give him a better, more secure and tranquil future."

All the land covered by Land Reform Laws had to be expropriated by the end of 1952. From then on, the Sila Law allowed four more years for development and reassignment of the land and the Stralcio Law, eight years.

Once the large tracts of land left the hands of the large proprietors, groups of surveyors, sociologists, agronomists and the like took over. These men and women were, almost without exception, exceedingly dedicated and sincere. A young woman sociologist who was working about twelve hours a day to expedite the development of land in the Maremma section north of Rome took a weekend off to marry a medical student in Florence. On Monday morning, after the wedding, she took her new husband to the Maremma district, showed him around, explained the project, put him back on a train for Florence and bade him go home and wait until she was finished with her job.

THE WHOLE PROGRAM for the reform, reclamation and restoration of Italy's surface is huge. By the early 1960's, the government expects to spend about six billion dollars to convert nonproductive and semiproductive acreage into farmland that will support tens of thousands of new landowner families. This figure, almost representing the total Italian budget for two years at the present rate of expenditure, will attempt to extract the utmost output and work possibilities from the tragically inadequate land. Some of the funds will come from various other sources including private investors, the World Bank and foreign

countries. The U. S. and Germany have been, and are expected to continue to be, the largest foreign contributors. Yet, foreign help is minute when contrasted to the total figure.

The Land Reform programs alone are envisaged to cost about one billion dollars. The other five billion are being spent on a wide variety of projects. A good portion of the land on which work is being done already belongs to small holders and will not be reformed.

One of the major types of land development involves reclaiming it from the swamps, lakes, lagoons and dried up river beds which abound in the lowlands. Well over three million new acres have been added to the productive surface area this way. More good, fertile farm land is behind dykes in the Bradano and Agri River Basin and in the Po River Delta than in the Zuider Zee area of Holland.

That land which is desert or near-desert is developed and restored by tearing up useless scrub growth, deep-plowing the infertile ground, putting in irrigation systems and setting up programs of extensive fertilization. Hilly terrain is expertly contour-plowed to retain the maximum precious topsoil. Very steep hills are picturesquely terraced by a succession of stone walls buttressing steps of soil extending almost to the very top. Land reclaimed from mountains, deserts or below sea-level is assigned to small farmers much the same as that expropriated from the large proprietors.

An English newspaperman noted: "These industrious people seem to till the soil with a needle and thread."

The enormous Fund for Southern Italy, or *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* (*Mezzogiorno* means midday, where the sun is highest) is by far the most courageous of the land development projects. It is well on its way to expending two billion dollars for the improvement of the terribly underdeveloped South (the general area south of a line running from a few miles below Rome on the west coast roughly toward the northeast, ending about 100 miles above Rome on the east coast; and islands of Sicily and Sardinia).

Two billion dollars is about one-fifth of the entire annual income of the twenty million people who live in that area. The *Cassa* works hand in glove with Land Reform programs.

In addition to work on the land and road and aquaduct building, the *Cassa* is concerning itself with building first-rate accommodations to attract tourists to this beautiful and interesting part of Italy. A sad paucity of tourist revenue has hitherto flowed into Calabria, Lucania, Puglia and Sardinia.

In the Land Reform programs, after land has been reclaimed from below sea-level, mountains or deserts, or expropriated from the large proprietors, it is divided up into small plots, furnished with houses, barns, silos and miscellaneous farm equipment, and sold to unlanded farmers in the area on thirty year terms. Interest rates are nominal. The cost to the farmer never exceeds two-thirds of the government expense in developing or transforming the land. In the case of land that has been expropriated, the assignee pays the indemnity due the former owner. For the first two years no interest is due and the principal payments are kept extremely low. Frequently, direct government contributions or subsidies ease the burden placed on the shoulders of the new assignee.

The task of determining which of the many deserving families should be assigned the all-too-insufficient land involves two major considerations: the number of Working Units the family possesses, and the closeness of the family to the land that has been reformed. Unlanded families having over the minimum Working Units whose members worked the land before it was reformed are given preference. (If the land has been reclaimed, the poorest families living closest are given preference.) That land which is left unassigned is awarded to those families who already own very small plots in order to bring their total holdings to at least five acres.

The Working Units of a family indicate the work potential of its members. An able-bodied man between nineteen and fifty counts as one Unit and the rest of the family is graded downward

according to their ability to work the land. For example, a woman over sixty counts as one-tenth of a Working Unit and a woman between nineteen and forty-five, six-tenths. The size of the plot assigned to each family, moreover, is proportionate to its number of Working Units.

In an area of average fertility, the largest family plot is seldom more than fifteen acres.

Though the Italian Government makes every provision to ease the transition of the families from unlanded peasantry to small proprietorship—ranging from establishing guarantees, affording grace periods and setting up cooperatives and numerous local courses in agriculture—it must be severe if they default in payment or fail perceptibly to improve the land. In such cases, the first assignee loses the plot and one of the numerous families on the waiting list gets it. Furthermore, all payments on the principal are refunded and an allowance made for any improvements to the land.

THE MAJOR OBJECTIONS to Land Reform, other than those expressed by land owners and their spokesmen, are as follows: That such redistribution of the land is tantamount to Communism or, at least, extreme Socialism; that the government remains breathing over the shoulder of the small farmer during the thirty years it takes him to pay off his debt; that Land Reform has failed to have the desired effect of dissuading new owners from political extremism; and that nowhere near enough is being done compared to the urgent need.

The accusation that the program of reforming land is "creeping socialism" was most summarily dismissed by Pope Pius XII in September, 1953, when he said: "Christian principles governing the institution of private property do not give the present owners of such land an absolute right against all others to whatever is surplus above their own needs, whether the land is used or not. In such cases, acquisition on just terms in order to settle new farmers is not a 'Socialist' measure. It is precisely the oppo-

site, being aimed at the extension of private ownership, at the creation of a class of working proprietors which are the very antithesis of 'Socialism'."

One of the most articulate admonitions against the perceptible tendency of the Italian Government to inject itself massively into the lives of the new landowners comes from one of the "universal men" of this generation—author, painter and political philosopher, Carlo Levi. He spent several years among the poor, unlanded people of South Italy more or less in exile during the Mussolini regime and has come to know them well. He cautions: "They [the new owners] are afraid the Government will make them pay for their newly acquired land with some of their even more precious liberty."

True enough, the countless "do's" and "don't's" the government imposes on new land owners smack very sharply of bureaucratic state paternalism. Many of the farmers complain bitterly that the government trusts them enough to give them land, yet doesn't trust them enough to work it. Feverish efforts are now in progress among Land Reform authorities to withdraw increasingly from the picture and permit the farmers to exercise their individuality and sovereignty. An Italian newspaper man has remarked: "A man who feels himself continually directed by an overly paternalistic government will never mature politically. Hence, the farmer will continue to support the extremist parties until he is made to feel like a sovereign man with valid opinions and views."

Commenting further, Carlo Levi idealizes: "The Reform will be truly successful only if it is a *peasant* reform; that is, if it gives the peasants a feeling of quiet pride and assurance that, with the government's help, but with their own free will, resources and courage, they are on their way to achieving their own destiny—a new, freer and more human way of life than they have ever known before."

In South Italy, it would appear from over-all statistics that the Communists on the one hand and the neo-Fascists on the

other are gaining votes; yet, a detailed inspection of the actual areas where Land Reform programs have been carried out indicates just the opposite trend. Actually, in most regions where land was reformed effectively and efficiently and enough time passed for the new owners to get the "feel" of ownership, the Communists and their Socialist allies, as well as the extreme Rightists, have suffered markedly. Moreover, the Christian Democrats have gained.

The essential catalyst in the process of political conversion would seem to be *time*. A new owner needs *time* to establish his self-confidence, to recognize his place in the society and to assume a sense of responsibility in the prevailing system. All these factors combine to dull the edge of his extremism.

In a number of communes of Southern Italy like Cerignola, Lavello and Irsina, where the programs have been completed for several years, the Communist Bloc, which garnered over fifty-five percent of the popular vote in the 1948 elections, lost on the average of seven percent in the 1953 elections. The Christian Democrats, who sponsored and put the Land Reform programs into effect, gained the seven percent. It is estimated that at present the average of Communist losses approaches ten percent.

THOUGH well over a million people have been resettled and the productivity of millions of acres greatly increased, the fact remains that millions of families still want for land and millions of acres still go begging for reform. But the expense to reform the entire Italian boot would indeed be astronomical.

And, even if all the land in Italy were reformed, millions of people would remain landless. In a country where 410 persons live on every square mile (U. S., 55), the problem of equitable land distribution seems insoluble.

The hope for Italy, over and above land reform and development programs, would seem to lie in the marked acceleration of industrial expansion. In this, the year that the Sila Reform Pro-

gram in Calabria ends, it is most satisfying to note that crop production is up thirty to sixty percent of what it was before Reform and that this area, long one of the most desperately impoverished and demoralized of Italy, is beginning to develop a climate of comparative vigor and hope that will eventually make the establishment of large industry possible and gradually raise the economic and social level to that of Northern Italy and the rest of Europe. In 1960, when the much more extensive Stralcio Land Reform program ends, it is only to be hoped that the results will be proportionately dramatic.

METAL HARVEST

Within this fruit the seed, the pulp, the rind
 Join to globe an orange in the mind.
 About this fruit have lip and tongue and cheek
 Pressed a mold of round and firm and sweet.
 Unbroken the sense, continuous the shell:
 Orange at eye announces sweet to smell,
 Tang to tongue, resilience to finger,
 Till separate oranges to *orange* swell
 And juices tasted, unconsumed shall linger.

Only one in a million million trees
 Drops the hard joke or the soft disease,
 When eye, perceiving but the usual facts,
 Betrays the lip to lard, the tooth to wax;
 Or when fingers, rounding on known ease
 Of firm, cool, globe-skinned juices, squeeze
 The metal harvest of Hesperides.

ALBERTA T. TURNER