

Southern Italy: Land, Politics, And the Empty Belly

CLAIRE STERLING

IN THE aftermath of their near-disaster in the recent Italian elections, one of the most painful questions that confront Alcide De Gasperi and his supporters is, What happened to the south? Land reform in the southern provinces was the outstanding achievement of the De Gasperi Government's seven years in power. Presumably these provinces should have been the Christian Democrats' best territory on June 7. But there the Center parties dropped well below their 1948 totals, while the extreme Left picked up three-quarters of a million new votes and the extreme Right found enough strength to move into an assured position in national politics. Of the ninety-four Monarchists and Neo-Fascists now sitting in Parliament, all but eleven come from the districts south of Rome.

The outcome is not only embarrassing for De Gasperi but disturbing to all those who believe that Communism, or any other extremist movement, can best be checked through rational social reform. The land program was rationally conceived, has been in rational execution for three years, and so far seems to have had precisely the wrong effect. If the democratic forces are to survive another election, they will either have to find convincing proof that the project as presently conceived is sound, find a way to make it so, or abandon it entirely before it makes any more enemies.

Much of the opposition to land reform was, of course, inevitable.

The big landowners could be counted on to go over to the Right as soon as they lost their land; the Communists were bound to sneer whatever happened. But there are not enough big landlords to account for the rightist vote in June, and the Communists made surprising gains in the districts where land reform was furthest advanced.

The landlords' explanation for this is that the southern peasant is so unmanageable, unreasonable, and ungrateful as to make any effort to help him a waste of money and time. The Communists' explanation is that the peasant is perfectly capable of reason and gratitude but has nothing to be grateful for. Neither

opinion satisfies anyone who has met the peasants in question or seen what land reform has done.

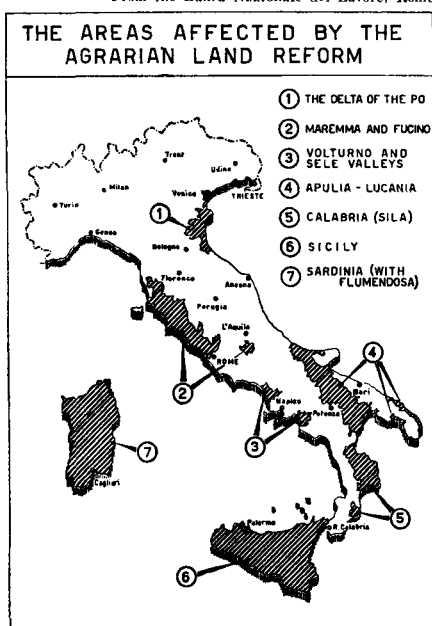
Beyond Hope

Even as originally planned, the land-reform program was not designed to solve all of Italy's farm problems. It was to provide land for only a tenth of the Italian farm workers who had none or nearly none, and was to affect only a third of Italian farm acreage. It could not possibly bring real prosperity to all the southern peasants who received land; it might ultimately permit some of them to live a little better than before, but in itself it could never enable them to live very well.

The government's purpose was not so much to redistribute old wealth as to create new. The law for the most part leaves well-run property alone and directs the expropriation only of estates that are used poorly or not at all. Under such terms, the state could free no more than a million and a half acres, on which about half a million men, women, and children would have to support themselves. In most cases that is still impossible. The government's ambition is to enable them to do it some day by gradually bringing the land to life. The vastness of this objective suggests why progress has been so terribly slow and the political rewards so meager.

Some northern pockets of land-reform territory lie in a Tuscan district called the Maremma and in the Po Delta, but most of it lies in the

From the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, Rome





southern regions of Apulia, Campania, Lucania, Calabria, and the islands of Sardinia and Sicily.

A TRAVELER can go for miles through Lucania or neighboring Calabria without seeing a tree, a ribbon of green, a house, or a spring of fresh water. Occasionally he will find a sign of where water once flowed in hard-baked river beds, or he will see great gashes in the mountains where too much of it has come racing down to flood the plains below.

What nature and history hadn't done, the southern noblemen had. Like their forefathers, they had been weirdly inconsistent. They were fond of hunting wild boar in the Sila forest but thought nothing of disfiguring it by felling the magnificent trees for timber. When the resulting floods poured down, it never occurred to them to build the mechanical devices that might not only check the floods but capture water to irrigate the land. Their passion for this land was so great that their daughters were frequently forbidden to marry lest any part of their estates pass out of their families; yet they gave no care to the land itself. Many of them rarely saw it. Although they owned splendid castles they built no roads for their Alfa-Romeos, strung no telephone or electric wires, and therefore usually preferred the comforts of the city to the crudities of the country.

Their holdings were mostly left in the hands of big tenants or of overseers, who cared no more for the property than the owners. Where the

earth was dry and deep plowing might have caught some rain, they let it lie fallow, sometimes for so long that metal plows could not cut it without breaking. Where the soil might, with care, have supported olive trees, they rented it out for pasture; five to seven years must pass before an olive tree bears. Where the earth was rich, they put it to profitable but soil-exhausting crops such as tobacco or wheat until it was depleted.

The peasants were forced to assist in this work of destruction. They could buy no land, even if they could borrow enough money, at thirty per cent interest, for a down payment; the landowners wouldn't sell. Therefore, the peasants either had to work for the big tenant or the overseer at about ten dollars a month, or rent the land in very small parcels at very high prices for periods of no more than three years. They often had to travel seven or eight miles to reach their plots, and many had to work four or five plots several miles apart in order to earn a living.

In general, their tools were those they made; in some cases, their plow was a heavy plank with long nails in it, drawn by a mule if they had one. Above all, since the soil was not theirs, they exploited it as ruthlessly as the noblemen and overseers did.

THE PEASANT had no time for schools; in some parts of Lucania and Calabria, three-quarters of the population can't read or write. Amid this poverty and ignorance, the population goes on increasing, even though in the Sassi—cave dwellings—of Matera, half the babies die before they are weaned.

In the Calabrian village of Cutro, one room often holds two or three families. The women there have sunken eyes and chests, the children are blinded by trachoma and syphilis, the unpaved streets are thick with garbage, donkeys, and flies, the water—what there is of it—is laden with typhoid; and for these people, together with 350,000 others in that particular part of Calabria, there is no surgical or obstetrical clinic, no tuberculosis or venereal-disease dispensary, no resident doctor outside the provincial capital. There are

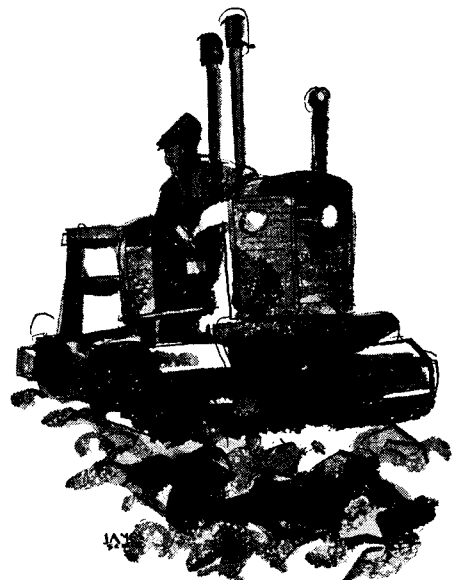
some communities where no land can be spared for cemeteries.

By the time the government stepped in, these people had passed the point where they might have helped themselves by themselves. Where they had not fallen into hopeless apathy, they were eaten with hopeless anger, striking out wildly in rebellions they lacked the strength to sustain. To seize the land by force meant only to be driven off again by the police—even to be shot, on occasion, like animal marauders—and to retreat again into hopelessness.

A Bold New Program

The government arrived with great plans and high hopes, and set out to reclaim not only the land but everyone on it, to bring not only water, electric power, roads, trains, and tractors but also social workers, technical counselors, doctors, and teachers.

It sought to accomplish this through two institutions. One was a network of six regional Reform Agencies. The other was the Cassa del Mezzogiorno, or Southern Fund, with an appropriation of \$1.5 billion to be spent in ten years. About \$33 million of this was put up indirectly by the United States through the ECA Counterpart Fund; the rest was to be underwritten by the Italian state. The Cassa's job was to finance and supervise big interregional projects such as dams, aqueducts, highways, railroads, and reforestation, while the Agencies carried out all the partic-





ulars of human and land reclamation within the reform areas.

Over ten years these organizations planned to bring 900,000 acres of arid land under irrigation, doubling the total in the south; to prepare 1,375,000 acres of uncultivated or undercultivated land for dry farming; to prepare an additional 3,000,000 acres for future development; to plant new trees on and otherwise restore 4,000,000 acres of mountain basins; to make the soil increase its annual yield by \$200 million; to establish whatever manufacturing the area could support; and to bring an ample supply of drinking water for the first time to 2,103 communities with eighteen million inhabitants.

The plans are gradually being carried out, but with infinite difficulty, frustration, and delay. It took two years for the Reform Agencies to finish searching all the deeds, making all the surveys, wrangling with all the landowners' lawyers, and finally to take the designated land by forced sale. Even now, no more than a quarter of this land has been reassigned. Too little land and too many people have made redistribution a desperate problem. Thus in towns like Spezzano Piccolo in Calabria, the quota was no more than two acres for a family which might have had six children when it got its farm, now has seven, and has an eighth on the way.

Today such an allotment cannot support such a family. Ten years from now it might. The agencies are

bringing in bulldozers to break the caked soil, level the ground, haul out stones; they are teaching the peasants to build windbreaks, dig drainage ditches, use contour plowing and crop rotation; they are planting olive trees in what was once pasture; and until these bear, fruit trees that will bear at once have been planted. They are experimenting with new seed and new crops. They are replacing work animals with meat and dairy cattle, and providing tractors, sowers, binders, and threshers.

IN PROJECTS of this kind success depends at least as much on human reconstruction as on technical efficiency, and here the program is showing signs of what may be fatal weakness.

The government's problem was, first, to restore the southern peasants to physical vigor, bring them close to their farms, and put them into decent houses. After that came the question of teaching them to read and if possible to write, to become self-reliant, to plan ahead, to use cash credits for long-term improvements, to accept technical advice, to pool their limited resources in co-operatives for using machinery and marketing crops—to become, finally, healthy and independent citizens.

Housing alone has proved enormously difficult. The peasants could not simply be taken out of their warrens and set down in isolated new cottages near their land; Mussolini had tried that in a few places and

had failed. There must be a sense of community: a church, a school, a post office, a café. But such a job requires trained sociologists, of whom there are few in Italy. It is also expensive. Although a few pilot models are being built—the new two-hundred-family village of La Martella, near Matera, is an impressive example—most Agency officials consider them too elaborate and too costly. The usual solution has been a compromise: either very small villages with some services or clusters of simple cottages with subcenters for services not too far away.

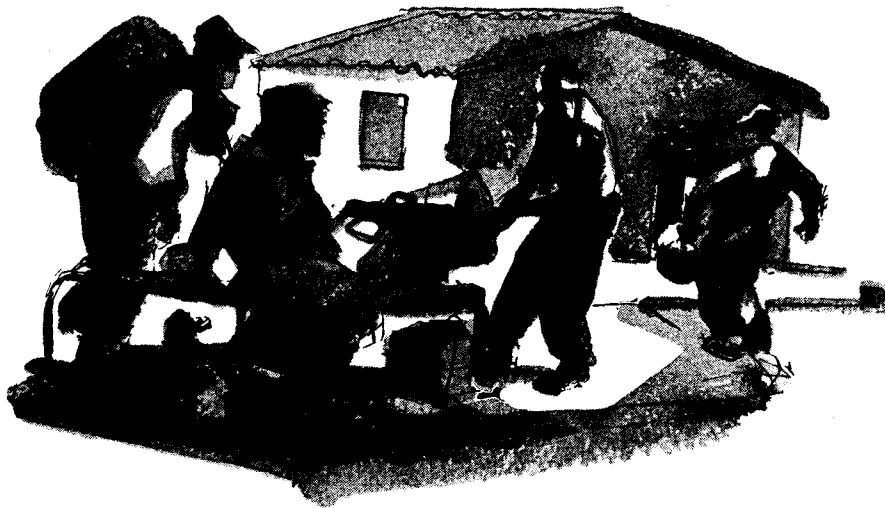
Houses are slowly going up; slowly the water and light are coming; secondary roads are being built; silos and warehouses are under way; marketing centers are being blueprinted.

The Politics of Misery

But the peasants are not delighted. Some are beginning to be barely hopeful. Many remain diffident, suspicious, even openly hostile. They point to the hearths of their new houses and say they are too low and smoky. They say that they must still walk a mile to the well for water, or that the stone ovens for baking bread are too small. And they say, over and over again: "We have too little land," or "The land is bad."

Most of these reactions were to be expected. The southern peasants have been betrayed by Rome too often to trust it overnight. Also, as a Calabrian priest-poet once wrote, they have been "taught by life to hate the government as their mortal enemy, and expect it to do everything for them." Moreover, what life hasn't taught them the Communist Party has. Despite its efforts the party has made few true converts, but it has created thousands of "misery Communists," who are convinced that government and barons are one, that the Catholic Church is an ally of both, and that nothing can be gotten from any of the three without taking it by force.

The Communists have, of course, been proved wrong on several counts. First they predicted that the nobles would never give up their land, then that the peasants would never get it. By this spring they were forced to change their line; during the election campaign they argued that the



land that had been given up before the elections—not very good land or very much of it—would be taken away afterward. In any case, they maintained, whatever the peasants had gotten or would ever get was given only because of Communist pressure. The election returns showed how many peasants believed them.

The Monarchist and Neo-Fascist leaders harangued the peasants just as loudly. Whatever they may have promised the big landowners privately, they were vociferous in their public demands for more drastic and revolutionary reform. Those peasants whose religious misgivings prevented them from voting Communist thus had a convenient alternative outlet for their disappointment, disillusion, or general hostility to the remote and slow-moving government in Rome.

THE GOVERNMENT had been giving some gratuitous help to its enemies. Many of the ovens are, in fact, too small, and many hearths do smoke; some houses have been built in long straight lines at the edges of new highways, and the wells dug, inexplicably, at one end. Although fifty thousand houses have been promised, only six thousand are so far under construction, and only a few hundred completed. Moreover, parish priests and local Christian Democrats did exert strong pressure, during the election campaign, to give new houses and land only to good Christian Democrats, a form of bribery that was supremely self-defeating; for every peasant ostensibly

won over in this manner at least one other was embittered.

Most of all, almost no teachers, doctors, or social workers have as yet been brought in, and not enough are being trained; the machinery and marketing co-operatives, indispensable to the program, are not yet functioning; and the whole idea of broadening the peasants' mental horizons is so far limited to a few local meeting rooms with radios. In the opinions of many agricultural authorities, this tendency to forget what was originally a great social vision can bring the whole program to ruin.

Some of these weaknesses can be traced back to the Communists. The government's fear of the Left was so strong that in several instances it built houses and allocated land without proper study in its hurry to win votes. Moreover, many parish priests, particularly in isolated villages, have resisted all educational proposals in the fear that semi-literate peasants will espouse Communism before they have time to learn better. Above all, since co-operatives are classically vulnerable to Communist penetration, the Christian Democrats have refused in several places to sanction them at all, or have tried to stifle them in advance with strict government controls.

The program is also beginning to feel the weight of the ubiquitous Italian bureaucracy—the hundreds of clerks and third secretaries in the multiple ministries who are gradually coming to demand the right of passing on every specification for a win-

dow or a door. It is held back, too, by many local Christian Democratic politicians, some of whom regard the Agencies as no more than a useful instrument for patronage, others of whom resist the program actively or passively because their sympathies are openly or secretly with the landowners. Most of all, it is hampered by the fact that although the Agencies include many excellent technicians and dedicated, imaginative men, there are not enough of these. Too many of the Agency staff are administrators whose only experience was the colonization of Libya, where the prevailing theory was that one room with a view of a banana tree was enough for any family; too many others are political appointees with no experience at all.

ALL THIS is in no way meant to suggest that the program should be written off as a failure. It has already done momentous things that cannot be undone. It has broken the cruel and unproductive southern baronial system, probably forever; it has already made striking progress in conquering nature; and it has given the peasants their first taste of independence in a thousand years.

But these very accomplishments have put some highly dangerous forces into motion. The barons are now organized in an angry and powerful opposition, while the peasants' appetites are increasing every day.

Under these circumstances, it does not seem likely that the program as it is working at present will pacify either side. The government will probably have to choose between the two and adjust its policies accordingly. Choosing the landlords would mean risking not only the end of parliamentary democracy in Italy but a peasantry securely in the hands of the Communist Party. Otherwise De Gasperi will have to risk offending the Right much more seriously than he has so far, reducing the already shrunk estates and possibly even encroaching on those that have been operated with care and intelligence. If he decides to do this he may not be able to persuade his own party to go along; and even if it does he may not be in time to stop the peasants' slide to the Left. But it now seems to be his only chance.

Senator Bricker

And the Nut Who Knew History

WILLIAM H. HESSLER

Scene: Office of Senator John W. Bricker (R., Ohio) in the Senate Office Building at Washington.

BRICKER: Who is it wants to see me?

SECRETARY: I'm not sure. He's an oldish man in *very* odd clothes. Says his name's Madison—James Madison.

BRICKER: Another nut, I suppose. But show him in.

MADISON: A good day to you, sir. I hope I am not trespassing unduly upon the time of a much-occupied statesman. I am James Madison.

BRICKER: (*With veiled sarcasm*) Ah yes, our fourth President!

MADISON: Quite so, Senator. I am flattered to be remembered, if only by number.

BRICKER: (*Now enjoying the game hugely*) Oh, we remember you for many things, Mr. Madison. You were

the largest figure in the writing of the Constitution and the recorder of the debates. And you were in Congress for a while.

MADISON: In four Congresses, to be exact.

BRICKER: But not in the *Senate*.

MADISON: True, that honor never came to me. But I was Secretary of State for eight years, and President the next eight. And those were not quiet times. Pray tell me, does that not compensate for my never having sat in the Senate?

BRICKER: (*Proudly*) There's nothing in the world like being a United States Senator, though of course you were of great service to the Republic in its formative period. But tell me, what brings you back to Washington from—well, that is, from wherever you've been the last century and more?

MADISON: (*With dignity*) I have been in Heaven, Senator. Indeed, nearly all the Presidents are there; and a right jolly company they are, rather off to themselves in the Distinguished Members Section of the English-speaking Division of the Great Men Department.

BRICKER: (*No longer so cynical*) Heaven doesn't sound very democratic, Mr. President.

MADISON: Certainly not. Heaven is a proper kingdom. Constitutions, bills of rights, and the separation of powers—all such inventions of prudence, as I once called them in *The Federalist*—are only needed on earth, where greedy and wicked and stupid mortals have to protect themselves from one another.

BRICKER: Yes, yes, of course. And you've come back for a long visit, Mr. Madison?

MADISON: No, sir, my visit is much

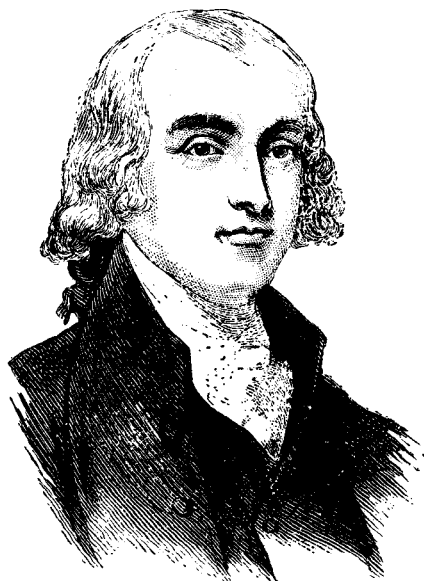
abbreviated. I came by special permission to witness the sesquicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, in which I had a not inconsiderable part, as Mr. Jefferson's Secretary of State. But I found no one taking account of that great stroke of diplomacy which doubled the size of the Union. So I came to Washington. I have seen the Pentagon, and now I am here to see you, my dear sir.

BRICKER: This is very flattering, Mr. Madison. Why didn't you pay your one call on the President?

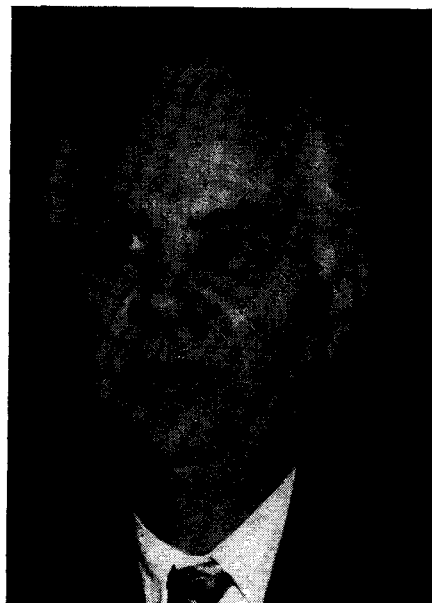
MADISON: Sir, Mr. Eisenhower may indeed have need of my advice. But if I may make so bold, you have the greater need of it.

BRICKER: (*Interested*) Tell me more.

MADISON: I am told, Senator, that you mean to have the Constitution



Madison



Bricker

Wide World