

THE ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE MEZZOGIORNO FROM THE 18TH CENTURY TO UNIFICATION

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Rosario Villari's contributions to the economic history of the pre-Unification Mezzogiorno have over time been eclipsed by the author's longer-running fascination with the seventeenth century and by the success of his later textbooks. However, the essays on the economic and social history of the final century of the Regno borbonico written in the 1950s and early 1960s were major contributions to the post-war renaissance in the historical writing on the pre-Unification south. Villari's approaches and findings have stood the test of time, while his formulation of the origins of the *questione meridionale* remain highly relevant to current debates on the south in the century before Unification.

Keywords: Rosario Villari, Mezzogiorno, Peasantry, Questione meridionale, Economic history.

Parole chiave: Rosario Villari, Mezzogiorno, Contadini, Questione meridionale, Storia economica.

Rosario Villari's contributions to the economic history of the pre-Unification Mezzogiorno – which, as Anna Maria Rao rightly reminds us, should more accurately be the Regno di Napoli and the Regno di Sicilia, or, after 1816, the Regno delle Due Sicilie¹ – have never been overlooked, but over time they have been eclipsed by the author's longer-running fascination with the seventeenth century and by the success of his later text-books. However, Villari's essays on the economic and social history of the final century of the Regno borbonico were major contributions to the post-war renaissance in the historical writing on the pre-Unification south that have lost none of their immediacy today.

1954, as Umberto Gentiloni has underlined, was a critical moment in

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¹ A.M. Rao, *Mezzogiorno e rivoluzione; trent'anni di storiografia*, in «Studi Storici», XXXVII, 1996, 4, pp. 981-1041.

Villari's career². After studying political philosophy under Galvano Della Volpe at the University of Messina, Villari was actively involved in the political leadership of the peasant movements in Calabria. However, the publication of essays on *Rapporti economico-sociali nelle campagne meridionali* in 1953 and *Per la storia rurale del Mezzogiorno nel secolo XVIII* in «Movimento operaio» in 1954 marked the decision to emerge himself fully in studying the history of the Mezzogiorno³. That switch came at the key moment in the political and cultural history of the post-war Mezzogiorno, signalled by the launch in Naples in the same year of the journal «Cronache meridionali» to which Villari was an enthusiastic contributor. The founding of Francesco Campagna's Crocean and Europeanist rival, *Nord e Sud*, in the same year made Naples the centre of the post-war renaissance of the earlier *meridionalista* tradition. Like those of Pasquale Villani, Rosario Romeo and so many others of his generation of young post-war Italian historians, Villari's studies were part of this fertile intellectual and political moment. Villari's 1954 essay set out a critical overview of the economic and social history of the south before Unification and set out a research project that would later be realized in *Mezzogiorno e contadini nell'età moderna*⁴. Composed of a closely integrated set of essays that explored different aspects of agrarian change in the age of Enlightenment, Villari's analysis drew on a detailed reconstruction of the management of the feudal states of the Caracciolo di Brienza inn the Cilento. But the volume's broader objectives had been set out in the 1954 essay, which began by drawing attention to the need for new research on the history of the *borghesia agraria meridionale*. His principal focus was what he termed the *luogo comune* that a new and predominantly commercial *borghesia* had emerged in the south before Unification. Dismissing these unfounded ideas, Villari argued that what needed to be explained was why the pre-Unification *borghesia meridionale* had remained exclusively agrarian. To ask that question, he acknowledged, was to reveal how little the history of social and economic relations in the pre-Unification south had been studied, even though the *economia agraria* and the land question had held a central place in the writings of the 18th

² U. Gentiloni Silveri, *Briefly Remembering Rosario Villari (1925-2017)*, in «Journal of Modern Italian Studies», XXIII, 2018, 3, pp. 229-233.

³ R. Villari, *Rapporti economico-sociali nelle campagne meridionali nel secolo XVIII*, in «Quaderni di cultura e storia sociale», II, 1953, 6, pp. 227-245; Id., *Per la storia rurale del Mezzogiorno nel secolo XVIII*, in «Movimento operaio», VI, 1954, 4, pp. 513-538.

⁴ R. Villari, *Mezzogiorno e contadini nell'età moderna*, Bari, Laterza, 1961.

century southern economists from Paolo Mattia Doria to Galanti. Yet despite the central place of the *questione agraria* in the writings of these economists, historians had focused primarily on the ideas of the reformers, not on the agrarian economy or on agrarian social relations. As an example he cited how the revolution of 1799 was still known mainly through the pre-First World War writings of Benedetto Croce, who had shown no interest in the peasant protests that were part of that revolution and certainly not in the motives of the poor who had rallied to the Sanfedist army of Cardinal Ruffo. The essay closed with a discussion of peasant revolts and the deeply contradictory character of the rural anti-feudal movement, the ambiguous attitudes toward private property and importance of the loss of *usi civici* as opposed to rising land rents. All of these questions were closely related to Villari's own experiences in the post-fascist peasant movements in Calabria, and to his belief that changes in the primary sector and their impact on the different sectors of rural society were the central issues in economic and social history of the pre-Unification south. Among recent studies he singled out Pasquale Villani's research on the *catasto onciario* which he praised, while noting that the *catasto* offered only a static picture of the structure of agrarian wealth. For a better understanding of the strategies of the feudal landowners and their responses to the changes taking place in the agrarian economy in the course of the 18th century, he believed that the key sources were the archives of the great feudal families.

This was what led him to the estate archives of the Caracciolo di Brienza, the project around which *Mezzogiorno e contadini nell'età moderna* took shape. This was a pioneering exploration of the *Ancien Régime* agrarian Mezzogiorno in transition and crisis. New demographic pressures, rising prices and expanding commercial demand were all elements in these developments, although with consequences that varied from place to place. A complex picture was drawn that pays as much attention to the lands of the church and the religious houses and the *demani* as to the feudatories. Church revenues were as much at risk as those of the lay landowners, and the reduction in the supplies of the low-rent leaseholds and credit provided by the religious houses and the *opere pie* had devastating consequences for the entire *società contadina*. The final quarter of the century, Villari argued, was when «la crisi organica, permanente, secolare della proprietà coltivatrice meridionale [...] raggiunse le punte più acute»⁵.

⁵ Ivi, p. 40.

Mezzogiorno e contadini set the crisis of *Ancien Régime* agrarian economy in the context of a much longer historical process and Villari traced the indebtedness of the 18th century feudal landowners and the small peasant farmers to a process whose origins reached back to the seigneurial reaction of the 17th century that had been the main cause of Masaniello's revolt. At the core of that transition was the gradual transformation of feudal property into *latifondi*, a process that saw the public attributes of the *demanio feudale* transformed into outright property; «L'evoluzione del feudo in libero e assoluto possesso latifondistico»⁶. This, Villari argued, was why Delfico, Palmieri and Galiani at the end of the 18th century claimed that Neapolitan feudalism was a «fantasma»; the abusive exercise of claimed feudal rights was still untouched, but the restrictions that had formerly attached to feudal property had by and large been stripped away⁷.

In *Mezzogiorno e contadini* Villari explored the interactions between different dimensions of the transition of the rural economy; the changing strategies of the feudatories illustrated from his studies in the archive of the Caracciolo di Brienza; the critique of the economists; and the actions of the government. At the centre of this interplay of conflicting forces and interests, Villari emphasized in particular how the state used the *università* and local communities as levers in their campaign against feudal privileges. The emergence of a new *borghesia agraria* was a direct product of these conflicts. «Con l'aumento assoluto degli affitti, la forte diminuzione delle quote coloniche di partecipazione ai prodotti della terra, la diminuzione dei salari, l'usura, la sfrenata usurpazione delle terre comuni, la rottura dei vincoli del sistema annonario, si affermava nel Mezzogiorno una grande borghesia agraria». But while this new *borghesia agraria* did not transform the existing structures of the agrarian economy, the conflicts from which it originated had undermined the cohesiveness of the rural communities even before the final Bourbon reforms. The Bourbon attempts to divide the *demani* in 1792 and the French reforms that followed, and especially the abolition of the old village *parlamenti* in 1806, were decisive blows to the older communal systems that decisively shifted power to the properties classes. The Caracciolo archives showed clearly that the principal beneficiaries of the Bourbon and French reforms were the barons, and Villari pointed out that all four of the *comuni* that were part of the Caracciolo

⁶ Villari, *Rapporti economico-sociali nelle campagne meridionali*, cit., p. 228.

⁷ Villari, *Mezzogiorno e contadini*, cit., p. 45; Id., *Rapporti economico-sociali*, cit., p. 232.

patrimony mobilized in «un fronte anti-feudale, in cui confluirono sia i contadini poveri che il medio ceto di professionisti proprietari»⁸.

Even before 1806, «la stessa debolezza economica della borghesia stimolerà, specialmente dopo l'eversione della feudalità, l'uso più oppressivo e violento di questi poteri e sarà quindi uno degli elementi determinanti di quel sistema di odio e di paura che caratterizzerà i rapporti sociali nelle campagne nel secolo successivo»⁹. Whereas the Bourbons had tried to change feudalism within the traditional social order, the French adopted new methods and sought to make the new landowners their political partners. Murat's *Commissione Feudale* played a critical role in this political project, and explicitly attempted to use the land of the former feudatories, of the church and the village commons to create a new modernizing class of landowners. But this did not lead to any major transformations in the essential structures of agrarian society, because the reforms left intact the *latifondi* which constituted «una base più che sufficiente per l'affermazione di un nuovo ceto di grossi redditieri [...]». Il limite dello sviluppo dell'agricoltura intensiva era così nuovamente segnato»¹⁰.

On the other hand, these changes could only exacerbate the tensions and violence that had been entrenched in the southern agrarian society for a century and more, that Villari vividly described by citing a report written in 1819 by the *sindaco* of Atena Lucana to the *intendente* of Salerno on the outcome of the *quotizzazioni* of the *demani comunali*:

Se bene la legge mi autorizzasse a riassegnare queste quote distratte prima del decennio, pure sono inabilitato a divenire a questa misura perché sono certo di essere attentato se non in vita almeno nelle sostanze, specialmente in campagna, dai compratori, i quali essendo forestieri e di paesi rissosi, sono facili a commettere degli eccessi¹¹.

Mezzogiorno e contadini set the processes of change in the southern agrarian economic in a context of transitions that reached back to the crisis of the 17th century, that would become the principal focus of Villari's future work. But it also reaches forward into the final half century of the Regno borbonico, and indeed the final essay concludes with the peasant revolts in support of Garibaldi in Matera and Lagonegro in September 1860.

⁸ Villari, *Mezzogiorno e contadini*, cit., pp. 134-136.

⁹ Ivi, p. 156.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 187.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 175.

Villari's conclusions were similar to those of his fellow historians, and especially Pasquale Villani. But although his research would lead him back to the 17th century and then to his remarkable set of wide ranging historical studies and text books, in the early 1960s he also wrote a number of incisive studies on the economic history of the southern mainland in the last decades of Bourbon rule that remain relevant and even prescient in the light of more recent debates on the southern economy before 1860.

Their subject was what many were claiming had been the promising industrial initiatives that originated in the South under Gioacchino Murat during the *decennio* and were subsequently taken up by the Bourbon monarchy after the revolutions of 1820-21. In an essay on the *Problemi dell'economia napoletana alla vigilia dell'unificazione* published in 1957, Villari had traced the interest in these industrial initiatives back to Francesco Saverio Nitti in the early 20th century¹². Nitti saw in these developments an early attempt to develop an industrial future for the south, precisely the economic strategy of which he was to become the principal advocate in the decade before the Great War. Since Nitti's strategy was widely shared by the key figures in Svimez who played a leading role in shaping the government's southern development strategies in the 1950s, it is not surprising that these earlier Bourbon industrial initiatives should have attracted new interest after the war.

Villari's position was rooted in his insistence that the impact of commercial expansion in the 18th century had had little impact on the agrarian economy. In the case of the new industries and manufactures established after the 1820s, Villari turned to Giustino Fortunato's critique of Nitti's claims that the Neapolitan economy had flourished in the final decades of Bourbon rule. Fortunato had argued that Nitti had been misled by focusing on a small number of governments supported industrial projects, whose development had in any case to be set in the context of a much more contradictory process of economic development. Villari then turned to the 1853 inquiry on the state of agriculture and manufactures organized on the Borbon government's behalf by the Reale Istituto d'Incoraggiamento. The inquiry revealed the narrow geographical base of the Kingdom's manufacturing enterprises that were located in and around Napoli and Salerno, where the Wonwiller, Escher, Mayer, Schepfer Wilmay and Wumails cotton factories

¹² R. Villari, *Problemi dell'economia napoletana alla vigilia dell'unificazione*, Napoli, Macchiaroli, 1957.

were located. There was also a cotton spinning works owned by Gaspar Egg at Piedimonte d'Alife in the Terra di Lavoro, which in 1834 employed 1300 workers, and smaller textile mills in the capital, in the Isola del Liri, at Sora and Chieti. By 1840 these enterprises were producing 2 million libbre of yarn and 6 million cotton broad cloths a year.

The largest industrial enterprises in the Regno were the state arsenals in Naples and Torre Annunziata, however, where the Kingdom's ships, railway carriages and rolling stock were built and maintained. Together with the engineering works of Zino & Henry founded in Naples in 1834, which by the time of Unification employed over 1000 workers, the Regno had the largest industrial enterprises and the largest number of industrial workers of any Italian state, including the Regno sabaudo. In addition, the founderies at Mongiana, Bivongi and Pazzano in Calabria were producing 24,000 *cantaia* of wrought iron annually¹³.

While these achievements were heavily publicized by the government, the development of these industries was entirely dependent on government support and protection. Indeed, the 1853 report was intended to defend the government's protectionist policies against the free-trade criticisms that had been openly voiced during the revolutions of 1848-49. These were directed primarily against the protectionist tariffs that had been introduced after the revolutions of 1820-21, with the aim of promoting the national merchant marine and creating a new industrial and manufacturing base in the Kingdom. These tariffs followed the same logic as the protectionist policies of Goacchino Murat and even the mercantilist objectives of the 18th century Bourbon rulers. Like Murat's earlier measures, after the revolutions of 1820-21 had destroyed the Kingdom's finances Luigi de' Medici protectionist tariffs were designed to reverse the Kingdom's trade imbalances and in particular its dependence on imports of French and British manufactured and colonial goods. Through import substitution de' Medici aimed to promote nascent local manufactures and give the Regno greater economic independence¹⁴.

This strategy had no imitators in any of the other Italian states before Unification, and was in many respects a pioneering attempt to assert the independence of the Regno. But it had little chance of succeeding because

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ See G. Cingari, *Mezzogiorno e Risorgimento. La Restaurazione a Napoli dal 1821 al 1830*, Bari, Laterza, 1970.

it out-reached the economic resources of the Regno and was never viable in political terms. First it brought the Regno directly into collision with its powerful foreign trading partners, who responded with damaging reprisals. The British were primary targets of the new tariffs and responded by imposing punitive tariffs on Neapolitan olive oil and other key exports, giving rise to a long running trade war that culminated in the crisis of the *zolfi siciliani* in 1840. Faced with the threat of British naval intervention, the Bourbon protectionist strategy was in retreat well before 1848. But no less important, the protectionist project had proved damaging to the landowners and merchants engaged in foreign trade, who suffered the full weight of foreign reprisals. Hence, the Bourbon policy risked alienating the landowners who were the monarchy's principal political prop and in their attempts to balance these conflicting demands government policy became increasingly erratic.

The 1853 inquiry unintentionally revealed how contradictory and confused the government's policies had become after the revolutions of 1848-49 in Naples and Sicily, which caused the government to avoid further attempts to expand industrial or manufacturing initiatives beyond the capital and Salerno for fear of their negative social impact. Similar concerns were evident in the government's refusal to extend the provision of banking or credit facilities in the provinces. The concentration of expenditure on public works in Naples, the Terra di Lavoro and Principato Ulteriore only served to exacerbate the internal economic inequalities of the Regno.

Villari also drew on Carlo De Cesare's 1857 free trade critique of Bourbon economic policy, an essay that voiced the discontents of the landowners who believed that the government's protectionist policies had made Neapolitan manufacturers complacent, forced them to use inferior raw materials and offered no incentive for technological change. Dependent on cheap labour and state-subsidized markets, these enterprises had little wider impact on the economy since domestic consumption was minimal. The presence of these protected enterprises further increased the commercial imbalance between Naples and the provinces, but without reducing the dependence on foreign imports. Of the 15.5 million ducats of foreign goods imported in 1853, according to De Cesare, 13.4 million were consumed in and around the capital, another illustration of the imbalance between Naples and its provinces.

The imbalances between the capital and the provinces and between Naples and Sicily contributed to the discontents that in 1860 would undermine the Bourbon monarchy. But Villari also refuted the claims that of all the Italian

states the Bourbon Regno enjoyed the lowest levels of direct and indirect taxation and the lowest sovereign debt of the pre-Unification Italian states, a controversy that dated back to Antonio Scialoja's comparison of the fiscal policies of the Regno borbonico and the Regno sabaudo¹⁵. Villari agreed that the Bourbon taxes were in some cases higher than appeared, but he argued that the government's fiscal policy had very little impact on the real economy. In the decade after the revolutions foreign trade was expanding and so were customs revenues, thanks to the international situation and especially the opportunities created by the Crimean War in 1856. But this did little to alter the underlying structural features of the southern economy. The industries in which the government had primarily invested were relatively unrewarding, while the abandonment of new investments after the revolutions of 1848-49 proved to be a serious error. If Naples had the first railway in Italy, after 1849 its precocious lead was quickly lost and by 1859 the Neapolitan kingdom had fewer kilometres of railroad than the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, never mind the Stati Sardi or Austrian Lombardy. Government support for education was limited to the university and higher institutes in Naples, while the funding of local and provincial schools and colleges came from local and provincial budgets.

Like the papal government in Rome, the Bourbons raised frequent loans from the Rothschild bank in the 1850s, but they never raised direct taxes. This, Villari claimed, was in line with Luigi de' Medici's maxim: «I popoli nei governi costituzionali mordano il freno, ma tollerano le imposizioni; ma nei governi assoluti, non le tollerano». Hence industrial expansion remained limited, as did foreign trade which at the time of Unification was in *per capita* terms the lowest of all the Italian states: 40 ducati *per capita* in Stati Sardi, 31.7 ducati in Toscana, 6.5 ducats in the Due Sicilie.

The consequences, Villari concluded, was that despite the presence of the new industries and manufactures, the underlying conditions of the southern economy remained unchanged: «Il movimento economico meridionale, in quanto movimento spontaneo, libero della iniziativa statale, era dominato dai grandi latifondisti – i quali riusciranno poi ad inserirsi posto nella politica finanziaria e doganale del nuovo Stato»¹⁶.

Villari returned to these conclusions in a subsequent review of the

¹⁵ *Bilanci del Regno di Napoli e degli Stati Sardi. Con note e confronti di A. Scialoja*, Torino, Società editrice italiana di M. Guigoni, 1857.

¹⁶ Villari, *Problemi dell'economia napoletana*, cit., p. 117.

comparative economic development in the Italian states from the Napoleonic period to the revolutions of 1848, again underlining the weakness of the southern economies¹⁷. Down to the 1840s, all the Italian states relied on the primary sector and specifically on silk, oil and grain as their principal exports. Between 1830 and 1845 the volume of Italian foreign trade expanded by 55% but accounted for only 3.5% of global trade. Nonetheless, the economies of the southern states were weaker than those of the north, and Villari attributed this to the greater impact of the 17th century crisis in those regions. By 1800, wealth and assets in the south took the form of land more than in any other Italian state, while capital in the south was concentrated above all in the cities. Not only Naples but Bari, Salerno and Reggio were examples of urban consumer economies that supported pockets of intensive agriculture in the surrounding areas. But these enclaves were symptomatic of what Villari termed a form of «sviluppo artificiale» although the traditional pattern of agricultural exports and imports of manufactured goods did change a little after 1820. The rise of new domestic textile manufactures caused cotton yarn imports to fall, and expanded demand for domestic wool. The merchant fleet also doubled in size between 1825 and 1860, although according to Augusto Graziani's later calculations, *per capita* foreign trade in the Bourbon Regno was lower than that of any other Italian or western European state.

At the time of Unification, the Regno's industrial enterprises lacked a solid economic basis. They relied on foreign investment and above all state protection and subsidies in the forms of regular contracts, which explains the devastating impact of the loss of the latter after 1860. Before that the weakness of domestic market demand outside Naples, Salerno, Bari and Reggio had been offset in part by the quasi-colonial status of Sicily, but the Sicilian market was very limited, as comparative figures for *per capita* consumption of sugar indicated – 1 kg per person per year in Sicily; 2 kgs in Tuscany; 5 kgs in France; 24 kgs in the UK¹⁸.

Villari concluded that in 1860 all Italian economists considered agriculture to be the key to Italy's future and that of all the pre-Italian economies the south was decidedly the least developed. In the opening sections of the

¹⁷ R. Villari, *L'economia degli Stati italiani dal 1815-1848*, in *Nuove questioni di storia del Risorgimento e dell'Unità d'Italia*, a cura di L. Bulferetti, P. Pieri, Milano, Marzorati, 1961, vol. I, pp. 607 sgg.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

anthology *Il Sud nella Storia d'Italia* (1961) for the first time he placed these studies in the broader context of the debates on the *questione meridionale*, arguing that post-war political developments and new historical research showed that it was no longer possible to understand the *questione meridionale* as the consequence of a «Mezzogiorno sfruttato, come riserva finanziaria e come “mercato coloniale” ai fini della formazione di un moderno apparato industriale nel Nord». That interpretation, Villari argued, «non è facilmente conciliabile [...] con la constatazione dell'arretratezza, dell'immobilismo semifeudale e dell'estrema povertà del mercato nelle regioni meridionali». These findings, he asserted, showed the need to re-examine «la capacità di espansione del sistema economico-politico creato sulla base delle premesse risorgimentali» and especially «il mancato sviluppo delle forze produttive nelle regioni meridionali ed i fenomeni politici e sociali che da ciò sono derivati»¹⁹.

The aim of the anthology was to underline «i più ampi termini politici del problema, che sono sempre, in definitiva, i termini più decisivi» and the central question was to explain why Unification and the Liberal state did not open the way for new productive forces to emerge. In the anthology, Villari traced the presence of those forces back to the Enlightenment, to Genovesi, Filangieri, Galanti and Fonseca Pimentel, before honing in on the emergence of a new *borghesia meridionale*. From the writings of Luigi Blanch on the *decennio francese* to Carlo De Cesare's critique of the economic weaknesses of the Bourbon Regno in its final decades, Villari underlined the limits of the *borghesia meridionale*, the unequal distribution of land, protectionism and the lack of schools and technical training. Anticipating more recent debates, Villari underlined that De Cesare was not comparing the south with the north since at the time of Unification Italy was «un paese agricolo e la sua industria moderna è in una fase appena iniziale»²⁰. But even in the broader context of the Italian economies, the south was backward in terms of the gaps between the major towns and the rural areas, the lack of communications, schools, technical training. The Bourbon government's economic policy was determined exclusively by the determination to maintain what Ludovico Bianchini in 1855 had explicitly termed a traditional «equilibrio»²¹. «Esisteva

¹⁹ R. Villari, *Il Sud nella Storia d'Italia. Antologia della questione meridionale*, Bari, Laterza, 1961, pp. V-VI.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 55.

²¹ L. Bianchini, *Principi della scienza del ben vivere sociale e della economia pubblica e degli Stati*, Napoli, Stamperia Reale, 1855.

quindi una precisa rispondenza tra politica economica e politica generale dei Borboni, e l'una e l'altra avevano un carattere esplicitamente conservatore e contrastante con le esigenze di rinnovamento che affioravano nel Regno anche dopo il 1848 e il grande esodo degli intellettuali liberali»²².

Even before 1860 the southern textile industry was experiencing great difficulties because of lack of markets, but even a committed free trader like De Cesare warned that the switch from protectionism «non dovesse essere “precipitata, né introdotta a furia”»²³. However, the new Piedmontese *tariffa doganale* that was introduced on 30 October 1860 in the former Regno reduced Bourbon protective tariffs in some cases by as much as 80% and was described by Villari as «una delle misure più radicali adottate dal governo nazionale»²⁴. Damage was in some cases anticipated, but not «la debolezza degli effetti propulsivi». Domestic and artisan manufactures suffered least because they had limited contact with the market, but the changes placed larger enterprises in great difficulty. By contrast free trade benefited some sectors of southern agriculture, while the aim of the massive sales of the *asse ecclesiastico*, *demani comunali* and *demanio antico* was to widen the basis of property ownership. But like the earlier French and Bourbon reforms, these objectives were undermined by their fiscal purpose which was to draw capital out of the southern agricultural economy. The result was to strengthen the monopolistic structure of southern landownership, a tendency accentuated by increases in tax burdens that were especially damaging for smaller landowners. An extended quotation of a comment by Luigi Sturzo that dates from 1924 perhaps best captures Villari's own understanding of the relationship between Unification and the *questione meridionale*. Sturzo claimed:

Chi guarda la storia del Mezzogiorno nel periodo del Risorgimento italiano e la funzione intellettuale e politica avuta nel movimento di un secolo di travaglio spirituale e politico, non si rende conto di come sia potuto avvenire che – appena unificato il nostro paese e superato lo sforzo nazionale nel compimento dell'unità – gli uomini politici del Mezzogiorno e della Sicilia non seppero né intuire le cause iniziali e profonde della crisi del ex Regno, né prevenirne gli effetti, né approntarne i rimedi²⁵.

²² Villari, *Il Sud nella Storia d'Italia*, cit., p. 56.

²³ C. De Cesare, *Il mondo civile e industriale nel secolo XIX*, Napoli, Gioja, 1857, p. 181.

²⁴ Villari, *Il Sud nella Storia d'Italia*, cit., p. 57.

²⁵ L. Sturzo, *Il Mezzogiorno e la politica italiana*, in L. Sturzo, A. Gramsci, *Il Mezzogiorno e l'Italia*, a cura di G. D'Andrea, F. Giasi, Roma, Studium, 2013, pp. 74-135: 83-84.

As had happened many times in the past – in the Enlightenment, at the time of the French reforms – the myth of the rich natural resources of the south gave rise to unwarranted enthusiasm and complacency. But the «fattori fondamentali [...] che diedero origine al particolare rapporto instaurandosi dopo il 1860 tra il Mezzogiorno e lo Stato nazionale vanno cercati in direzione diversa»²⁶. The critical factor, Villari concluded, was that the south had been the site of the definitive defeat of the Risorgimento radicals. Fears on one hand of a democratic revolution and on the other of «gli orientamenti politici filo-borbonici», caused plans for conceding greater autonomy to the ex-Regno to be dropped. On the eve of the plebiscite for annexation on 16 October 1860, Michele Amari had presented his proposal for a post-annexation *Consiglio di siciliani*, but like Garibaldi's proposal for an *assemblea politica regionale* the defeat of the radicals caused this to be abandoned, while Minghetti's attempt in 1861 to re-launch decentralization was ignored²⁷.

Villari addressed the question of the origins of the post-unification *questione meridionale* in a number of essays, and in particular in his portrayal of Gaetano Salvemini the «meridionalista» (1959)²⁸. But the fullest statement of his conclusions on the relationship between the southern economy at the time of unification and after can be found in the opening chapters of *Conservatori e democratici nell'Italia liberale* (1964)²⁹. Here the *questione meridionale* assumes a central place. Villari accepted as uncontroversial the relative backwardness of the south at the time of unification, but while the relative weakness of the southern economy was a consequence of the past he insisted this could not be taken to explain why that weakness continued after Unification and indeed became greater in the decades that witnessed the rapid industrialization of the north-west of the country. He firmly rejected the idea that this was the consequence of a historical dualism, or that the lack of development in the south after 1860 was the consequence of a form of internal colonialism in which the interests of the south were «sacrificed» to the need to industrialize. This was an argument that had recently been endorsed by Rosario Romeo, but for Villari the principal obstacles to economic growth in the south after unification were political and came

²⁶ Villari, *Il Sud nella Storia d'Italia*, cit., p. 70.

²⁷ Ivi, pp. 71-72.

²⁸ R. Villari, *Il meridionalista*, in E. Sestan, R. Villari, A. Saitta, E. Garin, E. Tagliacozzo, *Gaetano Salvemini*, Bari, Laterza, 1959, pp. 97-148.

²⁹ R. Villari, *Conservatori e democratici nell'Italia liberale*, Bari, Laterza, 1964.

from the latifundist landowners. Their political power was enhanced by the creation of the new state and they were the principal beneficiaries of the great post-unification sales of church and common lands. They in turn used that power to ensure that no reforms were introduced that would upset existing agrarian relations in the south, thus ensuring the continuing poverty of the rural populations, poor communications and infrastructures, the lack of schools and education³⁰.

These conclusions echoed the earlier arguments of Gaetano Salvemini and Antonio Gramsci, and clearly refuted the notion that the «sacrifice» of the Mezzogiorno was, as Romeo had argued, a necessary condition of Italian industrialization. For Villari, the *questione meridionale* was unquestionably a consequence of the political and social realities that forced Italian industrialization to take regionally differentiated paths in ways that had far-reaching consequences for the future of the Italian state and society.

³⁰ Ivi, pp. 26-28.