

Between “resistance” to the war and social conflict. Revolts and “peasant republics” in Southern Italy, 1943-1945

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to offer a unitary interpretation of the peasant revolts developed in southern Italy and in agro-towns from the Allied landings in Sicily to the first months of 1945. A largely uniform dynamic characterizes these practices of social conflict. The actions of the rebels always focused on the aim of “state closure”: the looting, destruction and burning of public buildings was the common scenario, making these conflicts apparently similar to the urban mobs or the peasant *jacquerie* of the middle ages and early modern epochs. Yet, these forms of social conflict arose in the middle of the twentieth century, which led in some cases to precarious and temporary para-institutional forms of popular, municipally based self-government. In the light of the study of new archival sources, the article analyzes the phenomenon through its community aspects and class conflict, and interprets it as a set of violent forms of “resistance” of the popular classes to the process of the unpopular wartime policies of military conscription and food rationing.

KEYWORDS

Peasant revolts, Southern Italy, 1943-1945, Self-government

Introduction

The phenomenon of the so-called “peasant republics” that emerged in southern Italy during and after the violent agitations of 1943-45 – consisting of improvised and precarious forms of self-government, municipally-based and constructed – has rarely found a place in the historiography of the Second World War period. An incomplete and summary reconstruction of these social conflicts that animated the transition between the fall of fascism and the advent of the Italian Republic was often relegated to local history, which sought to highlight the exceptional, extraordinary aspects of these events, often by assimilating them and circumscribing them as folklore.

More generally, for a long time these developments have suffered the same fate as the whole history of Italy under the Gothic Line. They have remained in the shadows because of the centrality and significance of the rupture represented by the Resistance movements in the North. It is not superfluous to recall that the first major conference that started to redress decades of neglect about the transition in the South of Italy since the Allied landings in Sicily (July 10, 1943) was only held, under the direction of Nicola Gallerano,¹ in 1984.

Nevertheless, an additional factor contributing to the distortion of some interpretive conclusions has been the prevalence of political and institutional history over social history. On this basis, the revolts were read as contradictions, disconnected from each other, due to the exclusive reference to the “republics” of mainland Italy or, alternatively, to those of Insular Italy. In particular the revolts that were triggered in Sicily were improperly called “*Moti non si parte!*” (anti-war revolts) and were solely related to the protests against the military mobilization of the Bonomi government and the consequent mass desertion. In the first case, they would be consistent with the democratic awakening of the post-Second World War period and precursors of peasant struggles led by the left from 1945 onwards. By contrast, in the second case, the revolts would be mainly operated by separatist and neo-fascist formations, and so would be characterized as a populist and reactionary trend. In light of the study of new archival sources, this contribution aims to overcome this duality and to propose a comprehensive reading that reflects the involvement and the centrality of socio-economic logic as well as ideological in the phenomenon.

2. Delimitation of the field of research

The 26 cases examined, though not exhaustive, are broadly representative of revolts that broke out between 1943 and 1945, from the Campania to Sicily. Although differing in some respects, they have many elements of homogeneity, which allow us to make generalizations, even in the very short period analyzed.²

¹ GALLERANO, N. (ed.), *L'altro dopoguerra. Roma e il Sud, 1943-1945*. Milano: Angeli, 1985.

² The analysed revolts took place in: Sanza, Calitri, Maschito, Ferrandina, Caulonia, Piana degli Albanesi, Palazzo Adriano, Alcamo, Mazzarino, Delia, Scordia, Licata, Palma di Montechiaro, Naro, Ravanusa,

The theater of the revolts in all cases is that of agro-towns³: rural villages typical of the South of Italy - and of several parts of the Mediterranean - with a large population and a predominantly agricultural economy. This kind of settlement was characterized by *latifundia* with a high degree of concentration of land ownership and the diffusion of forms of pre-capitalist labor relations and ownership (*gabella*, *colonia parziaria*, sharecropping, emphyteusis).⁴

Among the many forms of popular protests, sometimes violent, which occurred continuously during this period, we included in the analysis only collective actions in which the purpose of *political takeover* develops or, at least, was emerging more or less clearly, and in some cases was carried out for a few weeks. This takeover was interpreted and represented by the leaders of the revolt and its participants in very general and ambiguous terms, but it always coincided with the violent conquest of the control of the local government. In many cases, the revolt led to the creation of a new institution, whose new authorities temporarily embodied *de facto* the local power, which was variously called: “Committee of public safety” (in Calitri)⁵, “Provisional People's Committee” (in Comiso)⁶, “Executive Board”, “Commissioners” (in Piana degli Albanesi)⁷, “Council of the Revolution” and “People's Court” (in Caulonia)⁸ and “Executive party” (in Acate).⁹

Capizzi, Caronia, Ragusa, Comiso, Modica, Acate, Chiaromonte Gulfi, Scicli, Giarratana, Vittoria, Santa Croce di Camerina, Palazzolo Acreide. The research is based on the analysis of acts of military tribunals held in the Archive of the Military Tribunal of Naples (AMTN), the Archive of the state of Palermo (ASP), in copy form, in the Archive of the Campania Institute for the History of the Resistance (ACISR). Another important source of documentation is kept at the Central archive of the State (CAS). General considerations on the revolts triggered in Sicily, and more specifically on that of Catania may be found in MARINO, G. C., *Storia del separatismo siciliano, 1943-1947*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993. For a synthetic description of the Italian revolts see CHIANESE, G., *Quando uscimmo dai rifugi. Il Mezzogiorno tra guerra e dopoguerra, 1943-1946*. Roma: Carocci, 2005, pp. 126-141. For a well-documented account of the revolt in Caulonia see MISIANI, S., *La repubblica di Caulonia*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 1994. For memoirs, see OCCHIPINTI, M., *Una donna di Ragusa*. Firenze: Landi, 1957; CICCONE, S., *La Repubblica di Maschito. La prima repubblica libera nata dalla Resistenza*. Bari: Edizioni dal Sud, 1989 and LANZA, A. (ed.), *Testimonianze da una repubblica contadina. Francesco Petrotta e i giovani di Piana degli albanesi*. Palermo: Centofiori, 1979.

³ On the model of settlement of the agro-towns, see BLOK, A., *The mafia of a Sicilian Village (1860-1960). Study of violent peasant entrepreneurs*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1974; DRIESSEN, H., “Mediterranean agro-towns as a form of cultural dominance. With special reference to Sicily and Andalusia”. *Ethnologia Europaea*, n. 14, 1984, pp. 111–24 ; BARONE, G., “Egemonie e potere locale (1882-1913)”. In: AYMARD, M. and GIARIZZO, G. (eds.) *Storia d'Italia. Le regioni dall'Unità a oggi. La Sicilia*. Torino: Einaudi, 1987, p. 192; SCHNEIDER, P. and J., *Culture and political economy in western Sicily*, New York, 1974 ; CURTIS, D., “Is there an ‘agro-town’ model for Southern Italy? Exploring the diverse roots and development of the agro-town structure through a comparative case study in Apulia”. *Continuity and Change*, n. 28, 2013, pp. 377-419.

⁴ On the forms of agrarian contracts widespread in the South of Italy, see PLACANICA, A., “Il mondo agricolo meridionale. Usure, caparre, contratti”. In BEVILACQUA, P., (ed.), *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea*, vol. II, *Uomini e Classi*. Venice: Marsilio, 1990, pp. 261-324.

⁵ AICSR, Mario Palermo, b. 63, fasc. 309, Acts of the criminal proceeding against Gabriele Acocella + 56.

⁶ ASP, Military tribunal of the war, section of Catania, b. 7, fasc. 504, Acts of the criminal proceeding against Giacomelli Adriano + 119.

⁷ Report of the warrant officer of *carabinieri*, commander of the station of Piana degli Abanesi, f.to L. Portera, 17 march 1945, cit. in Lanza, A. (ed.), *Testimonianze da una repubblica contadina...Op. Cit.*, pp. 173-181.

⁸ MISIANI, S., *La repubblica di Caulonia. Op. Cit.*

⁹ ASP, Military tribunal of the war, section of Catania, b. 7, fasc. 508, Acts of the criminal proceeding against Vincenzo Petino + 37.

In the case of Vittoria¹⁰ and Ferrandina¹¹ they were both called Committees of National Liberation, where Communists and Socialists had a hegemonic position, and where the previous state legality was replaced with a “revolutionary” legality.

3. Popular “rationality” in the dynamics of revolt

The dynamics of these revolts were largely uniform. Popular reaction always involved attempts to shut down the state through looting, destruction and burning of public buildings, that is to say, the town hall, the tax and customs offices, the supplies office, the police barracks, the court and the prison. This was the common scenario in all the cases studied, making them more similar to the typical forms of urban and peasant riots of the Middle Ages and Early Modern epochs.

Here, probably, lies one of the reasons that has favored a reading that has neglected the political nature of these events. In this context, the approach of political parties, especially the left, adds another element of explanation. The revolts grew outside of and against the political line and the control of the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSIUP) who were engaged in the governments of national unity and, for the most part, they surged in 1943-44 when the left was still quite separated from the reality of the peasant South. Socialist and communist agrarian policy and trade union mobilization would only be consolidated in 1945. As a result, the revolts ended up being interpreted simply through the category of “spontaneity”.¹²

However, the presence of a general difficulty in penetrating the dynamics of these mainly peasant forms of conflict must be stated. Two intellectuals, who were themselves engaged in resistance, Giorgio Bocca and Roberto Battaglia, have written about resistance activities that took place in southern Italy: one, in 1966, emphasizing a “telluric energy, which we cannot foresee the consequences of: a hot fury that is located in the popular subconscious”¹³, and the other, in 1953, in particular regarding the “Four days” of Naples, described as “grandiose features and an indefinable phenomenon of nature”¹⁴. James C. Scott, for his part, in *Weapons of the Weak*, asserted that the “emphasis on peasant rebellion” was “misplaced” and that it “seems like visceral reactions of blind fury”¹⁵. According to Scott, this is an interpretative position coherent with his analysis of the everyday resistance of subordinates. However, he placed this in a theoretical framework that leads to an underestimation of the mobilizing factor of the

¹⁰ASP, Military tribunal of the war, section of Catania, b. 8, fasc. 509, Acts of the criminal proceeding against Giovan Battista Alecci + 133.

¹¹ CAS, MI, PS, 1947-1948, b. 4, fasc. facts of Ferrandina.

¹² See, for example, on the interpretation of the fights in Calabria for the common lands CINANNI, P., *Lotte per la terra e comunisti in Calabria (1943-1953)*. Terre pubbliche e Mezzogiorno. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1977.

¹³ BOCCA G., *Storia dell'Italia partigiana. Settembre 1943-maggio 1945*. Torino: Einaudi, 1966, p. 83.

¹⁴ BATTAGLIA, R., *Storia della resistenza italiana*. Torino: Einaudi, 1970, p. 122.

¹⁵ SCOTT, J. C., *Weapons of the weak. Everyday forms of peasant resistance*, Yale: Yale university Press, 1985, pp. 29 and 37. On the undervaluation of the ideological element, see his criticism of the Gramscian concept of hegemony, *ivi*, p. 304-350.

spread, from the outside, of revolutionary ideologies. Scott's neglect of this aspect is common and shared by many authors.

An understanding of the supposed easy excitability of the lower classes, especially the peasantry, the mechanicalness, even the "spasmodic" aspect,¹⁶ of its direct action methods was also, from another point of view, and in its more radical interpretive version, one of the elements of a vision focused on the irreducible anthropological singularity of the peasant and on its impenetrability or, at least, its reluctance, to undergo modern forms of politicization or simply any sort of politicization. The terminology, sometimes, is comparable to that used in the reports of prefects. In medieval times, we may add, in France and Flanders, the word sedition was associated with that of *commociones* (commotions), as Samuel Chon noted.¹⁷ It ultimately also has to do with the persistence of *presentism* in historiography so much so that in a recent book on the history of the Resistance in Italy, Santo Peli complained about the existence of a kind of "historiographical ostracism, more or less conscious"¹⁸.

The analysis of "peasant republics" allows us to investigate these interpretive debates. In this context, it is important to note that the outbreak of the revolts analyzed was almost always constituted by an event, an act perceived as an unexpected and intolerable injustice, which triggered public indignation and was capable of mobilizing informal social networks and forms of class solidarity. Often, the collective action was in response to acts of the repressive state apparatus, whose legitimacy, at that time, the population refused to recognize.

The spark in Capizzi was fueled by the arrest of a deserter. In Palazzo Adriano, by a member of the local Communist section accused of illegally utilizing a collective usage right. In Piana degli Albanesi, it was the theft of flour in a public storage unit and the subsequent discovery of a quantity possessed illegally in the house of a police officer. In Ferrandina, it was the arrest of the peasant Domenico Aspromonte, a communist and secretary of the Chamber of Labor, which enjoyed broad popular support, and the non-distribution of food ration cards for soldiers dispersed after the escape of the king and the signing of the armistice. In Ragusa, during one of the most important revolts that took place in Sicily during the winter of 1944-1945, popular anger was sparked after a woman, Maria Occhipinti - to whom we owe one of the few existing memoirs of these events - lay down on a road to block a military truck conducting sweeps for deserters.¹⁹

¹⁶ See THOMPSON, E. P., "The moral economy of the English crowds in the eighteenth century", in *Past&Present*, n. 50, 1971, pp. 76-136.

¹⁷ See COHN, S. K., *Lust for Liberty. The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200-1425*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 4.

¹⁸ PELI, S., *La resistenza in Italia. Storia e critica*. Torino: Einaudi, 2004, p. 232.

¹⁹ On the revolts of Capizzi, Palazzo Adriano, Ravanusa, Palma di Montechiaro and Ragusa, see CAS, MI, PS, AA.GG. RR., 1944-1946, b. 8, fasc. Sicily, popular uprisings. On the case of the revolt of Licata, see AMTN, Military Tribunal of Palermo, b. 33, Acts of the criminal proceedings against Giuseppe Muscia + 74. On the revolt of Alcamo, AMTN, Military Tribunal of Palermo, Acts of the criminal proceedings against Ignazio Cassarà + 75. On the revolt of Sanza, see ACISR, Passaro, b. 52bis, Acts of the criminal proceedings against Tommaso Ciorciari + 28.

In Licata, however, it was the reopening of the employment office, considered threatening to the prerogatives of the Labor Chamber, which provoked disorder. In Sanza, in October 1943, it was probably the first echoes of resistance taking place in the North, rather than the war for liberation being seen as the beginning of a social revolution, that convinced Tommaso Ciorciari, an old communist peasant, to put himself at the head of the revolt: a red flag was hoisted at the city hall and crucifixes and portraits depicting Savoy were removed from public offices.

However, a reading that would stop at these facts, by placing them in a relationship of cause and effect, is likely to ignore the real underlying causes of these phenomena.

The mass opposition against the military mobilization was not negligible. This factor helped to activate the rebellions, but does not in itself explain the sequence of the revolts, even in Sicily, where the separatist movement, focusing its propaganda on this subject, attempted a showdown (or perhaps an unlikely uprising on the island).²⁰ However, protests against conscription held simultaneously by young students, mostly separatists, always left people indifferent.

In relation to the Sicilian case, the reason why popular indignation accelerated and evolved was probably the decision of the High Sicilian Commissioner to obligate each producer, without distinction of any kind, to supply 25 kg of flour to the public stockpile. In the revolt of Capizzi, for example, there was also the unpopularity of the implementation of a new tax on pigs, whose breeding was widespread in this village of the province of Messina.²¹ In the center of almost all the revolts was the question of food rationing: in Ravanusa, Palma di Montechiaro and Alcamo, it was clearly the immediate origin of the shift to action by the masses, but in all other cases it was an important factor. Thus, it would be wrong not to fully assess how these revolts appeared to be linked, almost seamlessly, with countless protests for bread, often with women protagonists, that grew from the beginning of the full fascist war effort from 1941 onwards.²²

4. An attempt at a unitary interpretation

Overall, the phenomenon can partly be interpreted as a set of violent forms of “resistance” of the population to the process of war regimentation, in the double sense of military conscription and food rationing. These changes tended to modify and, in some cases, temporarily upset the balance of social relations and urban hegemony within communities.²³ The “peasant republics,” in this sense, can also be interpreted as

²⁰ See, MARINO, G. C., *Storia del separatismo. Op. Cit.*; MANGIAMELI, R., “La regione in guerra (1943-1950)”. *Op. Cit.*; PATTI, M., *La Sicilia e gli alleati. Tra occupazione e Liberazione*. Roma: Donzelli, 2013.

²¹ See, ACS, MI, PS, AA.GG. RR., 1944-1946, b. 8, fasc. Sicily, popular uprisings.

²² See, ACS, South Government, MI, PS, AA.GG. RR., 1943-194, b. 1, and b. 2.

²³ The importance of the phenomenon of the revolts analyzed is to be linked with the survival of the centrality of the local power to totalitarian fascist challenge. See LUPO, S. “L’utopia totalitaria del fascismo”. In *La Sicilia. Op.Cit.* pp. 428-457. More generally, on the role of local elites in southern Italy, and within a very extensive bibliography, see LUPO, S., “Tra centro e periferia. Sui modi dell’aggregazione politica nel Mezzogiorno contemporaneo”. *Meridiana*, n.2, 1988, pp. 13-50; PEZZINO, P., *Il paradiso abitato dai diavoli. Società, élites, istituzioni nel Mezzogiorno contemporaneo*. Milano: Angeli, 1993; MUSELLA, L., *Individui, amici, clienti: relazioni personali e circuiti politici in Italia meridionale tra Otto*

elementary attempts at self-government through which the popular classes clung to local communities to find a way to escape from the poverty and constraints imposed by the war by cutting off relations with the state. In Maschito, in the summer of 1943, a “republic” was formed even to oust German soldiers being evacuated from southern Italy and housed by the local fascist leaders.²⁴ The interpretive category developed by Jacques Sémelin of “civil resistance,” even if it focused on forms of peaceful action in response to the Nazi domination in Europe during the Second World War, can be useful for reflecting on this issue. The malaise of the population of Southern Italy and its opposition to the war, nevertheless, resulted in “collective action” as “dynamic forms” that “gradually are put in place” and are intended to “maintain the integrity” of the community and the “social cohesion of the groups that it is composed of”²⁵.

On the other hand, the logic of community survival is not the only factor necessary to explain the revolts. Another central aspect to be integrated in the interpretation was the long-standing endemic class conflict in the South which was temporarily erased, or at least reduced, by fascism and the outbreak of the Second World War, only resurfacing during the days of “insurrections”. Class conflict, even though it was messy and episodic, developed and led to the targeting of property owners. In Licata, three wealthy owners were kidnapped, while the secretary of the Socialist Party, one of the leaders of the revolt, announced the intention of the distribution of land for grazing. In Ferrandina, thefts against landowners multiplied and in Sanza a group of peasants armed with axes and other tools, led by Tommaso Ciorciari, prevented the expulsion of a sharecropper and demanded respect for the collective usage right of “*sforestamento*”, an old practice renewed each year on land that once belonged to the ecclesiastical estates. In Alcamo, Naro and Palazzo Adriano, the population destroyed not only public buildings, but also the social “clubs” of the propertied classes and local notables. In Mazzarino, the private homes of wealthy landowners were also looted and burned.²⁶

There were thousands, mostly peasants, who participated more or less actively in all cases (in villages and small towns that had, at most, a population between 3,000 and 20,000 inhabitants). A more precise sociological composition of the rebels and the leadership of the revolt may be inferred from the defendants in the trials that took place in the Military courts of war. It should be noted the presence of peasants and artisans (including classical figures of radicalism: blacksmiths, shoemakers, carpenters), a high prevalence of the former over the latter and the low presence of *braccianti* (farm workers)

et Novecento. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994; ASTA, M., “Sicilianismo come populismo e ideologia della transizione”. In: SALMERI, S. (ed.). *Democrazia, educazione e populismo*. Enna: Euno Edizioni, 2012; MARINO, G. C., *Il maligno orizzonte e l'utopia. La profonda Sicilia dai Fasci al fascismo*. Caltanissetta: Sciascia, 1998.

²⁴ See CICCONE, S., *La Repubblica di Maschito. Op.Cit.* More generally, on the cases of resistance in the south of Italy see, CHIANESE, G., “Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Puglia”. In: COLLOTTI, E., SANDRI, R., SESSI, F., *Dizionario della Resistenza*, vol. I, *Storia e geografia della Liberazione*. Torino: Einaudi, 2000, pp. 23-32.

²⁵ SÉMELIN, J., *Sans armes face à Hitler. La résistance civile en Europe, 1939-1945*. Paris : Payot, 1989.

²⁶ The available documentation has allowed us to reconstruct the sociological composition of the most active groups of the rebels in Alcamo, Camastra, Ferrandina, Licata, Maschito, Palazzo Adriano, Piana degli Albanesi, Ravanusa, Sanza, Sciacca, Vittoria, S. Croce di Camerina and Giarratana.

- except for the case of the revolt of Ravanusa, where they accounted for almost all of the defendants.²⁷

The main role of the poor landless peasant (a category that encompasses a wide range of contractual relationships) was due to the fact that compared to the farm labourers they had more relationships with municipal offices (especially tax offices and those related to agriculture) and helps to explain the fury with which the rebels attacked the public buildings. Furthermore, the rationing system and illegal land grabbing accentuated social conflicts between the popular classes, artisans and peasants, and the great landowners, even in a context already structurally characterized by profound inequality and strong social cleavages.

The rebels of the “peasant republics” were primarily concerned, in fact, with adopting, in different forms, a system of redistribution of basic foodstuffs in a radically more egalitarian sense. Thus in Ferrandina where Giuseppe Aspromonte required longtime landowners to sell quantities of grain that were then sold to members of the communist section with controlled prices. Or Vittoria, where the socialists and communists constituted the “Workers teams” for the requisition of grain and established the “Commissions” which even landowners were obliged to participate in, forcing them to provide wheat to supply the insurgents and the population.

The concept of legitimacy, in the sense used by Thompson for the category of “moral economy” about English revolts in the eighteenth century, that is to say the “conviction - from rebels - to have the wider community approval” and act in defense of “a clear idea of the common good” by exercising traditional rights adapts perfectly to the cases analyzed here.²⁸ At the center of the revolts between 1943 and 1945 in southern Italy, there was always the demand for basic, primary needs, such as the right to grind flour and the right to bread. Another instrument of egalitarian redistribution, that of the collection, was present in some revolts, such as in the cases of Vittoria and Piana degli Albanesi.

5. Three emblematic cases: the revolts of Piana degli Albanesi, Maschito and Caulonia

Piana degli Albanesi is a village in the mountains of the province of Palermo, whose population is of Albanian origin. In this case, the leader of the revolt was Giacomo Petrotta, who had already joined the Communist party and had previous experience of political activism in Turin. His mentality is well represented in the lines of his will written shortly before the constitution of the “People’s republic”: “The undersigned Petrotta Giacomo, of Giuseppe and Schirò Elena, 27 years old, international revolutionary, convinced of the difficulty of hard work, I lead against the capitalist landowners in Sicily, for the common cause of the triumph of the proletariat, I will with God in my thoughts always keep my commitment. And if I should fall under the reactionary lead, because of

²⁷ See ACS, MI, PS, AA.GG. RR., 1944-1946, b. 8, fasc. Sicily, popular uprisings.

²⁸ THOMPSON, E. P., “The Moral Economy...” *Op. Cit.*

the death of my mother I want to share my property, half goes to my brothers and sisters, and the other half to the poorest of the Communist party section of Piana dei Greci [Piana degli abanesi]”. In religious terms, Petrotta also ends his diary with the hope of establishing in Piana degli Albanesi “only one sheepfold and only one shepherd”.

The rebels gathered food for the population, organized control of several farms to requisition wheat or other products held unlawfully and held under strict control the activity of the millers to ensure that they did “not take advantage of the flour of customers”. Everything happened with the blessing of the Church (Petrotta nominated the local bishop as one of the “commissioners”), the independent republic of Piana degli Albanesi, and its three directing principles: “brotherhood”, “unity” and “stabs to the insubordinates”²⁹.

The strong community ties and the same egalitarian aspirations that seek to recover a legitimacy that was perceived to be lost were also present in the “republic” of Maschito, at the head of which was Domenico Bochicchio, a communist, farmer and woodcutter, born in 1900. He kidnapped the *podestà*, one of the few large landowners of the village, by locking him up in his own house, removed the rationing system and distributed oil and wheat raised in the agricultural consortium. At the same time, the rebels forced the landowners and local leaders to provide wheat and money to the people: “There were four people in the commission” - Bochicchio would remember thirty years later - “I ordered them and made them take the money”, it was “a true Republic and I was the president. [...] I put the papers on the square here... to warn the population. [...] As a mayor”. The distribution of wheat at the time of the “Republic”, he said in response to questions from the reporter, was done “according to justice, to the needs, depending on the number of mouths”³⁰.

The case of the “republic” of Caulonia, is at the limit and at the same time at the crossroads of the typical ideological horizon of social banditry, blood revenge and more modern forms of social conflict. The leader of the revolt, Pasquale Cavallaro, an elementary school teacher, *andranghetista*, with a period of emigration to the United States, was also, in the 1920s, the organizer of a local anti-fascist movement of *amendoliano* orientation. After a period of political confinement, he joined the Communist Party and was appointed mayor of the municipality by the Allies in January 1944. As mayor, he proceeded to distribute public lands to the population.

During the disorders of the days of the “republic”, one of Cavallaro’s sons, Libero, would force his victims to shout: “Libero Cavallaro is the terror of the Ionian coast!”. However, the violence of the rebels tended to be controlled and disciplined through the establishment of a “Tribunal of the People”. The trials were open to the community, which had the right to attend with each person having a right of veto over the decisions of the “judges”. Nevertheless, the sanctions assumed the function and even the shape of a real *charivari* with a high rate of violence: the “charged”, almost all landowners and ex-

²⁹ See Lanza, A., (ed.), *Testimonianze da una repubblica contadina...Op. Cit.*,

³⁰ See Ciccone, S., *La Repubblica di Maschito. Op.Cit.*

fascists, were beaten, flogged, exposed to public ridicule, stripped or forced to stand barefoot in the mud and walk long distances.³¹

6. Conclusions

The peasant revolts and the “republics” of 1943-45, if they can be interpreted in some respects as an urban mob or a classical peasant *jacquerie*, were actually quite different. First, except for the cases of Comiso, Palazzolo Acreide, Alcamo and Chiaromonte Gulfi, and in spite of some archaic forms of conflict, they did not have a conservative character. Protagonists did not fight for justice or equality while cheering the king, whose portraits were, instead, publicly burned. Moreover, they were not simply looking to be heard or to be taken into account by the authorities. The peasants and artisans behind these revolts rather aimed to remove the local ruling elites to exclude propertied classes and notables from the political leadership of the community. The community logic coexisted with the conflict between social classes and the balance between these contradictory dynamics was continuously challenged during the revolt and changed as it developed.

A remarkable resemblance existed between these revolts and the anarchist revolts of Andalusia in the second half of the nineteenth century.³² In the dynamics of the revolts in these two places, the target of class violence was limited exclusively – except for one case only - to the economic and symbolic goods of the landowners, demonstrated an absence of any federative project and was characterized by a particular rebel language (which seemed to be influenced by the typical language of the secret societies, masonic, republican and anarchist). Even the ideology did not differ much. In spite of the affiliation of several leaders of the revolts of 1943-45 to the Communist Party, their ideology was rather close to that of a libertarian communism, influenced by the dissemination of anarchism in southern Italy during the nineteenth century.

It should also be noted that the South of Italy and Andalusia shared in addition to similar forms of peasant politicization also the same type of settlement of the agro-towns. This suggests the presence of a certain relationship between these two factors. Marc Bloch claimed, “peasant revolts were as natural to traditional Europe as strikes are today”³³. For the cases of the southern Italy and Andalusia we may thus add geographical and socio-economic factors to Bloch’s diachronic interpretation of these two forms of social conflict.

The degree of diffusion of revolutionary ideologies seemed to be a necessary resource of the collective mobilizations leading to the formation of “republics.”

³¹ See, Misiani, S., *La repubblica di Caulonia. Op. Cit.*

³² On the anarchist Andalusian revolts, see, LIDA, C., *La mano negra. Anarchisme rural, sociétés clandestines et répression en Andalousie (1870-1888)*. Montreuil: L'échappée, 2011; CASTRO ALFIN, D., *Hambre en Andalucía: Antecedentes y circunstancias de la Mano Negra*. Cordoba : Ayuntamiento de Cordoba, 1986; MAURICE, J., *El anarquismo andaluz: campesinos y sindicalistas, 1868-1936*. Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1990; HOBSBAWM, E., *I ribelli. Forme primitive di rivolta sociale*. Torino: Einaudi, 1966.

³³ BLOCH, M., *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*. Paris : Antwerp, 1931.

Biographies of the leaders of these revolts clearly demonstrate this. Nevertheless, even if we can define these revolts as anti-systemic, they did not call into question the direct ownership of the land. The community logic did not disappear and farmers did not manage to go beyond all the norms and values of agrarian hegemony. As has already been observed for revolts in Andalusia, they were movements that required a significant exogenous contribution to transform their ideology.³⁴

This is what happened, actually, almost seamlessly, thanks to the role of the left after 1945, and the union mobilization and development of the movement for the occupation of land and for the implementation of decrees taking the name of the Communist Minister Fausto Gullo (concerning the allocation of uncultivated or inefficiently utilized lands, distribution of the products in sharecropping contracts, and the question of collective usage rights). The same may be said for the movement for the conquest and application of agrarian reforms after the war. In contrast to the typical mob of large cities, or traditional peasant uprisings, this kind of popular revolt did not delay the expansion of the labor movement in these peasant centers. Instead, as the results of the elections in April 1948 confirmed, in two thirds of the municipalities where the revolts analyzed appeared, communists and socialists exceeded the percentage of votes obtained at the national level. In half the cases, they became the real “red” fiefs. And in Piana Albanesi and Mazzarino, the Communist Party had long received the absolute majority of votes.

³⁴ See, Hosbawm, E., *I ribelli. Op. Cit.*