

Chapitre 8

THE SPREAD OF *MEZZADRIA* IN CENTRAL ITALY: A MODEL OF DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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In the last twenty years - at least since the publication of Cheung's *The Theory of Share Tenancy* in 1969¹ - the so-called "puzzle of sharecropping" has once again become a topic of wide interest and discussion among economists. Once again, as had happened from Adam Smith to Marx to Marshall, the attention of many economists has fallen on this "geographically pervasive and historically tenacious institution of sharecropping".²

In the past, however, - for 17th and 18th century writers - the sharecropping system was blamed for causing the survival of a "custom economy" dominated by traditional forces, opposed to modern competitive market-based economies; recent studies have attempted to remove sharecropping from the first economic milieu to the second and to justify its presence even within a market-based economy. It is my own opinion that sharecropping can exist in both systems.

Detractors of sharecropping, amongst whom were found and still are found many historians, have accused it of discouraging and blocking agricultural progress through a lack of incentive toward capital investment and technological innovation. According to them, European absentee landownership, instead of following the path indicated by the English agricultural revolution, had condemned both the lands in its possession to remaining at a low level of productivity and its peasants to poverty and stagnation, if not to starvation. Modern economic theories - neo-classical theory in particular - tend much more to consider sharecropping as a relatively efficient system in the allocation of resources at least for given conditions, for example, the possibility for the landowner of enforcing contracts which specified the work to be carried out by the tenant's family, the existence of risk in both labour and land or an economy of a scale realisable through the introduction of sharecropping.

This paper presents a historical case, we believe, in which a sharecropping contract - *mezzadria classica* - was introduced as a means of providing a better allocation of resources. *Mezzadria classica* is the most regular and well-defined type of *mezzadria poderale* contract. It spread for centuries, adapting to demographic, economic and political situations until becoming a social and economic model characterising most of Central Italy. In its most complex and perfected form, however, *la mezzadria classica* began, at the end of the 19th century, to appear too rigid. This happened from the moment in which its basic inputs - first amongst them an abundant, diligent and skilled labour force - which had brought about the system's good fortune, was still essential for its survival, yet no longer sufficient to keep pace with contemporary agricultural progress. The very complexity which *mezzadria classica* had reached became a handicap for any conversion it might undergo. It thus survived into the 20th century as a system condemned to slow and inevitable obsolescence.

With the economic boom in Italy after the Second World War, which gave *mezzadria* families alternative work opportunities in the industrial and tertiary sector, the *mezzadria* system fell into rapid decline. Nevertheless, even to the present day there are still visible signs of its heredity: the agricultural landscape profoundly modelled by man, the scattered houses, the density of villages which constitute a real conurbation; or the small factory often belonging to the son of an ex-tenant, whose breaking away from the country was less traumatic, not only in geographic terms but also culturally, than that of the daily labourer.

1. MEZZADRIA PODERALE : PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Mezzadria poderale is a typical system of sharecropping in central Italy, in which it covers a continuous belt extending from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Adriatic and including the regions of Tuscany, Emilia, Umbria and Marche. Around the middle of the 20th century, before the economic boom, *mezzadria* was still, in this area, the most widespread form of contract in agriculture, to the extent of covering 70-80 % of cultivated land.³ Its introduction goes back at least to the 13th century and its expansion continued uninterrupted right through to the end of the 19th century. Unlike other Italian and European situations, *mezzadria* in central Italy was never replaced after its introduction by other forms of contract, except in a few cases which will be useful in helping us understand its basic requisites.

The centre around which the *mezzadria* world is built consists of two closely connected inputs; the first is the land, in the form of a *podere* with its parcels already under tillage and whose size (that of farmed land in particular)

corresponded, supposedly, to the work capacity and alimentary needs of the tenant family, and the second the family itself, which the contract signed by the head of the family engaged *in solidum*. The landowner provided the fixed capital (the land, possibly including vines, olive trees, mulberry trees and fruit trees; also included, almost always and with greater frequency over the centuries, was the farmhouse for the tenant family and its outhouses). The provision of the so-called operating capital, the "live and dead stock-on-hand" (livestock, seed and fertiliser) varied both in time and place. Normally, however, the tenant was unable to afford - except in one restricted area - the acquisition of livestock (and particularly cattle necessary for working the land) and as a result a partner or frequently, and later always, the landowner provided these as well. As for seed, the commonest rule was to divide the supply equally between landowner and tenant, but again it was usually the landowner who advanced even the part the tenant should have supplied, deducting it from the following yield. All the other farming costs were met following the equal division principle. The fruits were also divided in half, with a few exceptions (for example, profits from the woodland or mulberry leaves, if there was no silkworm breeding, were exclusively the landowner's) as were profits and losses on livestock. Outside these more or less common characteristics, the rest is uncertain. The size of the *podere* varies considerably, dependant on the intensity of crop cultivation, on the soil, on the presence or absence of woodland and pasture land and on geographical location. The size of tenant families also varies, even if these have characteristics which allow us to identify an average for each historic context. The length of contract also varies in time, gradually becoming shorter. There are, however, other essential aspects which should be pointed out.

Mezzadria poderale can not be identified with any kind of agricultural contract based simply on an equal division of produce, nor does it mean, from its first appearance, a system of self-sufficiency. *Mezzadria* in Central Italy, from its very beginnings, was part of a complex economic circuit which had as its centre the medieval manufacturing towns and their merchants. It is to such that the introduction of *mezzadria* on their estates is due and not only to ensure food supplies for their families and the city markets during the far from infrequent times of difficulty, but also to acquire and turn to profit any surplus in food and raw materials which might be sold on external markets. We too often forget that this kind of merchant traded in the whole range of possible goods required and not only in silk and woollen fabrics.

2. MEZZADRIA PODERALE BETWEEN THE 14th AND 15th CENTURIES: ORIGINS, MOTIVES AND NATURE OF CONTRACTS

At the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century *mezzadria* was

already widespread in many areas of Central Italy. In Tuscany it has a strong presence in the central hills around Florence, in the hills surrounding Siena and Arezzo and in the middle and upper Arno valley. In Umbria the contract spreads out from the rural area around Perugia. In Marche it is found in other hill areas which constitute immediate hinterlands to cities. These areas, which make up the original nucleus of *mezzadria classica*, exhibit one common characteristic; they are to a large extent, as far as property is concerned, in the hands of the city landowners.⁴ Certain surveys of the period give the measure of the phenomenon. In the Sienese area, already by the second decade of the 14th century, city landowners had acquired 70-80 % of the land nearest the city.⁵ In the Florentine *contado*, at the time of the 1427 land-register, land belonging to citizens of Florence made up about 2/3 rds of the land surveyed.⁶ "Rural" ownership resisted in marginal areas, like the mountains, or in areas - like the *contado* of Pisa - which had a particular historical situation behind them, marked on the one hand by the decline and desertion of the plain, on the other by the lack of interest of the important families, who had turned their attentions to sea trade and to possessions in Sardinia, for their hinterland.

One question that immediately comes to mind is why, at this period landowners chose to adopt *mezzadria poderale* on their estates. We might first recall the rather delicate and controversial factor of demographic trend. In certain areas - the Pistoia area for example - it seems that the spread of *mezzadria* coincides with a period of demographic decline.⁷ This situation, apparently, favoured a concentration of landownership and the creation of more efficient contiguous production units. In other words, it favoured the development of the *poderi*. The scarcity of the labour force must have made it convenient for landowners to ensure for their *poderi* a stably resident peasant family working there all year round and, at the same time, to increase productivity by investing in land improvement and stock. Elsewhere, however, as in the *contado* of Florence, *mezzadria* had already been introduced before the population crisis of the 14th century. There would therefore appear to be no close causality relationship in the origins of *mezzadria* between demographic trend and the circumstances of its introduction. *Mezzadria poderale*, in fact, even though it did not spread *pari passu* with the acquisition of rural estates by the town merchants, was a creation of this class of owners, quite independent of the demographic movement of the time.

The motives which led town merchant classes to acquire lands in the *contado* were numerous. In the phase between the 14th and 15th centuries rather than entailing a detachment from commercial and manufacturing activities, this acquisition served to guarantee their continuation. They bought land in the countryside in the first place in order to have tranquillity over food supplies. Central Italy at the time had a high level of urban settlement, the yield from cereal crops was low and communication was difficult. The food

control system, even if complex, was not successful in keeping the cities from the risk of recurrent famines: and thus the need for a secure hinterland for the town.⁸ Secondly, investment in land represented safety in that it involved less risk than with commercial investment, or at least useful in diversifying sectors for employment of capital. As we have already recalled, through landownership, profit could be made from selling surplus agricultural produce even on distant markets. Finally, the social prestige of possessing land should not be forgotten.

Alongside the rich town merchants and craftsmen and the landowning "peasants" who moved into the town and expanded their dominion in the country, we find as a necessary corollary an increasingly large stratum of property-less peasants who, together with their freedom from servitude, lost their possessions, and in more general terms, a crisis in peasant property which had survived up to then by the supplementary income derived from exploiting common land which, with the passing of time, had fallen more and more into private hands.

The town merchants therefore increasingly adopted and favoured the *mezzadria* contract in running their estates because this guaranteed a stable and assiduous labour force which they could control (as joint-participants in choices involving production) and ensured conservation of the owner's invested capital (both in real estate and stock, such as seed and cattle) together with a better yield through the incentive (half-share) to increase productivity and improve profits from livestock. Further reasons for the rapid spread of *mezzadria* came from the possibility of dividing risks and, from the tenant's point of view, of attaining the social status which offered him and his family certain guarantees against the heavier risks, work for his family the whole year round, a house, loans for seed and food, particularly valuable during the years of famine.

Although *mezzadria classica* appears to be a structurally complex and well defined situation, not all the elements of which it is composed were present everywhere from the beginning, demonstrating a process *in fieri*. The presence or not of the worker's house on the *podere* is most indicative of this. According to the Florentine land-register of 1427, 14 % of sharecroppers did not live on the lands they cultivate, but still lived - also for reasons of safety - inside the rural villages.⁹ In other cases the workers lived in one-time landowners' houses which had been declassified to workers' dwellings, or else in houses scattered throughout the countryside, built well before the advent of *mezzadria* - an example of such being the "towerhouses"; thus it seems that this kind of contract was not responsible alone for scattered settlement. Very often the house on the *podere* was initially a reference point, little more than a hut built of mud and bricks. They were extended as the

activity of the *podere* became more complex, with a need for cattlesheds, vat rooms and cellars for the wine, storage space for the cereals. Beside the workers' houses, from the 14th century onwards the rural landscape is filled with new landowners houses, the "villas" with their multiplicity of functions: a management centre for the agricultural work, for gathering and processing produce, an administrative centre for whoever had more than one *podere* and a status symbol for holidaymaking: the rural landscape recalled in the numerous accounts of 16th and 17th century travellers and which, in certain areas such as the Florentine hills, already appeared in all its "garden-like" elegance by the beginning of the 15th century.

At the moment the origins of the tenant family itself are not clear. In some cases - as happened in France - they were previously smallholders whose land had become insufficient to ensure economic independence, especially after reduction or disappearance of common land. In some areas the *mezzadria* labour force was provided by immigration; this was what happened in Marche where Slovenes, Albanese and immigrants from northern Italy were attracted to cultivating reclaimed land and made over to cultivation by the merchants of Ancona. In other cases, in a gradual process, difficult to follow, previous contracts which might have been lease, cropsharing, rent or piecework were transformed into *mezzadria*. The difficulty in defining the moment of transition between the old type of contract and the new is increased by the presence of clauses, extremely favourable to the tenant, which make their appearance during the 'rare man' period and which will become inconceivable a century or two later.

One point, however, which soon distinguishes the tenant *mezzadria* family from that of other agricultural workers or urban families, is their size. According to the 1427 Florence land-register, the group of *mezzadria* workers represent a low proportion of small *ménages* (20 % of their *ménages* had less than 4 persons as against the 35 % of the daily workers) while around 50 % of *mezzadria* families had between 6 to 10 members or more than 10. As far as demographic structure is concerned, the only salient difference in respect of other agricultural workers is found in the larger number of children who live within the family: *mezzadria* is therefore defined as a situation having, in that period, a notable *charge démographique*.¹⁰ It is probable that, initially, these peculiarities depended on the owners' strategy: they would have chosen for their *podere* the most suitable families in terms of number and age of members, directly or indirectly favouring the "creation" of such families through the regrouping of nuclei, brought closer by family ties, which before had been independent.

3. THE REPOPULATION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE BETWEEN THE MID 14th CENTURY AND THE 17th CENTURY

From the decades spanning the mid part of the 16th century the population of central Italy began to grow again, following the European trend if even at a lower rate. The repopulation of the countryside was distinguished by the expansion of *mezzadria poderale*. In the merchant cities the economic driving force of the manufacturing sector began to slow down in certain cases and capital that had been accumulated in the city was more and more frequently diverted towards the land in order to profit from the increasing prices of agricultural produce, above all the price of cereals. The city oligarchy increased its property in the *contado* by various means, not all new: the acquisition of common land; the confiscation of the property of defeated enemies; the acquisition of the land owned by people living in the *contado* more and more in a state of crisis because of the rise in population, which emphasised fragmentation of the property and productive units, and because of higher agricultural prices from which they were probably unable to profit, not having any marketable excess.¹¹

The population growth between the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th was characterised by a redistribution of the population. The city outskirts grew more than the traditional areas represented by the city and its hinterland. The plain, reclaimed and farmed, became a pole of attraction, while the internal mountain areas, sterile and inhospitable, underwent demographic decline. During this period the economically most vital zones corresponded with those where the *podere mezzadrile* was expanding. The *poderi* were taking land practically everywhere, using city owned property as a penetrating wedge. The town landowner now has greater contractual power especially over a more abundant work force. In some areas in the 16th century, the division of the olive oil yield is changed to the disadvantage of the tenant, bitter disagreements arise, tenants are more easily dismissed.¹²

As has been said, the price increases in agricultural produce in the 16th century affected cereals more than anything else, causing expansion in cereal farming. It is not only arable land on the *podere* that is extended however; there is also an expansion in tree culture, and above all in vines which, after grain, represent perhaps the most marketable produce. Legume production (beans and vetch) also increased with the idea of stemming the loss of soil fertility due to the continual sowing of cereals. On the agricultural scene, in the expanding *mezzadria* areas, therefore, the *poderi* are being worked more intensively - even if at the beginning only in the sense of more labour intensive. The landscape becomes distinctly bidimensional and the cycle of rural work engages the *mezzadria* family in periods of the year previously

never used or underused. Many *poderi* owned by the same landowner were organised into an administrative and central control unit, the *fattoria*, with two or three agents, the senior of whom, the *fattore*, represented the owner's interests locally. This type of organisation became increasingly more widespread and complex in the following two centuries which saw the *fattoria* take on the characteristics of a technical management centre for agricultural work and for transformation and marketing of produce, all this alongside its traditional aspect of administrative management.

4. AN AGRICULTURAL SYSTEM ON TRIAL: THE 17th CENTURY

A rather gloomy picture is usually painted of the demographic and economic system in Italy at the beginning of the 17th century, analogous to the general European picture of the period. The maritime cities have declined, the communes are in crisis and the city wool and silk industries are also on the decline. The Italian economy is in a state of stagnation through the general crisis in rural areas, through the fall in prices, through the heavy fiscal policies of certain governments such as the Spanish one. The 1630 plague transformed the phase of regression in course in northern central Italy into a truly total demographic collapse, from which, however, the areas quickly recovered.¹³ In the *mezzadria* area the demographic difficulties of the first half of the 17th century had no real dramatic impact. After the plague in the 1630s, in fact, the population began to grow again at a sustained rate and by the end of the century the losses had been more than made up for. Impressions of stagnation continuing over a longer period are somewhat misleading since they refer to stagnation or decline in certain traditionally populated areas, yet neglect the emergence of new poles of attraction which recruited a growing labour force. This phenomenon is more evident wherever, as in Tuscany, the government and the larger landowners promoted recovery of the plains on which, even before reclaiming operations got underway, *poderi* and *fattorie* were created and *mezzadria* introduced. In such a way the *mezzadria* system, from its original meaning of better allocation of already existing resources, became, through their actions, a model, a planning project for the economic, demographic and social life of a whole region to be colonised. Thus, for example, in the *contado* of Pisa, where at the beginning of the 17th century scattered settlement and *poderi* were still rare, the building of tenant farmhouses (*case coloniche*) was begun often before land reclaim had been completed. And where, instead, *poderi* were still being formed and yet the tenants were without houses, large owners such as the Order of St. Stephen took upon themselves the responsibility of building them, completing within a little more than a century a whole series of houses with homogeneous and thoughtful architecture, and equipping each *fattoria* with the necessary buildings for administrative purposes, for the elaboration of primary produce

and, in later centuries, for their role as management control centres for the agricultural activity.¹⁴ The personage of the *fattore* becomes more and more important: to him falls the difficult task of matching family with *podere*, of acting as intermediary between the landowner and tenant, of supervising the elaboration of produce and the marketing of the owner's part and even that part which the tenant left to the owner in repayment of debts and then, following market trends. And, of course, the market was no longer simply Florence or Perugia or Bologna.

The *mezzadria* system now supplied its produce to a very different circuit from that of town-countryside - never, one might add, closed - which had created it. Already in the latter half of the 17th century and then especially in the 18th century, the centre of economic life shifts increasingly more from the town to the country. Here, alongside the scattered settlement, the importance of commercial and manufacturing villages grows. Even changes in the market in respect of agricultural produce were met with relative success. The decline in the price of cereals was answered by introducing new forms of rotation in which legumes were given more importance, by the diffusion of industrial crops which were at the same time capital and labour intensive, such as hemp, or the introduction of maize. Another way of supplementing falling returns from cereals was the intensification of tree produce. Wine prices fell less than grain prices and viticulture began a phase of expansion. Even the presence of olive and to a lesser extent mulberry increased on the *poderi*.

These phenomena - reclamation, the increase of *poderi*, crop transformation and diversification - naturally do not affect the whole of the *mezzadria classica* area, but indicate a general tendency. On the whole, they led to greater property investment on the part of owners and more work for the tenant families. This is especially the case with the new herbaceous crops (one need only think of the amount of work involved with hemp) and tree produce, without mentioning the various elaboration activities on the *podere* or in the *fattoria*. Little by little the number of the tenant's working days multiplied. Nevertheless, the families continued to hope for such contracts, which, with the mixed crops and the owner's miserly subsidies, yet never turned down in times of hardship, protected them from the anxiety felt by daily workers. Thus *mezzadria* won the challenge of the 17th century. Where - as in Romagna - the area given over to *mezzadria* was extended, especially in the first half of the 17th century, by imitating neighbouring zones, but in an area which retained basic monoculture of cereals, there was no economic benefit - a family's presence in the farmhouse all year round was superfluous - and ended up by being abandoned.

5. TOO NARROW A GARDEN: ORGANISATION OF THE *PODERE* BETWEEN THE LATE 17th AND LATE 19th CENTURIES

The century intervening between the beginning of the demographic revolution in the late 1700s and the period following the Unity of Italy marks the point of greatest complexity in agricultural and demographic organisation attained by *mezzadria poderale* in the central Italian countryside. It is only towards the end of the 19th century when the general conditions of economic development in Italy change and change with them the path of agricultural progress, that *mezzadria classica* shows real signs of rigidity and obsolescence. Its relative weight with respect to the whole of the agricultural workers group tends, on average, to decrease. This phenomenon had gradually been manifesting itself, in the preceding centuries, in areas precociously involved in the expansion of *mezzadria*, areas which before others reached a saturation point.

The general population increase of the end of the 18th century and 19th century sustained a fairly high rate throughout the *mezzadria* area.¹⁵ The majority of this new population was absorbed by the countryside, where agricultural activity continued to require more physical manpower. The incipient demographic revolution and the beginning of the industrial revolution pushed up agricultural prices. From the last decades of the 18th century the Italian peninsula establishes itself increasingly more in the European market, providing primary goods and importing manufactured products. Even the corn, wine and oil produced on the *poderi* - especially the owner's part - begin to cross regional State boundaries, encouraged by a much more liberal customs policy than preceding centuries had seen, a policy in which country produce is rigidly linked to the needs of towns. Cultivation extends everywhere: it is the era of the final assault on woodland, on pasture land, on untilled land, while reclamation goes ahead on the central plains. On all farmed land - from marginal hill land or even the deforested and tilled mountain slopes, to the more fertile land of the marsh-freed plains - the network of *mezzadria* settlement expands, with the opening of new *poderi* and the dividing of some already in existence. With time, however, in a slow yet irreversible process, the availability of land for new tenant families falls away as saturation point is reached. The over-abundance of the labour force reduced the powers of the tenants in negotiating the clauses of their contracts. The most important production factors had by now become capital and land, and both - as was the entrepreneurial factor, as far as it existed - were in the possession or under the control of the landowner. Thus the few remaining contracts on a more than one year basis were reduced rigidly to annual contracts. Additional clauses become more onerous, loans to workers for seed and animal feed are subject to stricter checks and the practice of charging a kind of hidden interest begins

to grow. Some owners in the 19th century, go so far as to abolish or suspend this secular practice when the price of cereals is high, in order to have the whole of their own half share to place on the market; and this in times of hardship for the tenant families who rarely manage to obtain from their own half enough grain for their own annual needs. Greater checks are carried out on the tenants, not only for their work on the *podere* but also with regard to their private life. The owner or his agent checks the family's morality, their life style, agrees to marriages or forbids them under threat of dismissal, controls socialisation (from visits to fairs and markets to banquets for weddings and christenings).¹⁶

This series of phenomena has been interpreted by historians from different areas as a process of degradation in the *mezzadria* tenants condition and of progressive impoverishment of the category, who before represented the aristocracy among landless workers. And in effect, in a period of demographic growth and pressure on land, the labour force accepted not only heavier contractual burdens but also the very loss of their autonomy in controlling farming practices traditionally left to the tenant and of which the category was particularly jealous. This process, however, did not necessarily lead to the impoverishment of the tenant family. The combination of a greater supply of labour with a consistent employment of capital on the part of the owner and with land utilisation which was attentive to market demands may well be one of the causes of the emergence, between the 18th and 19th centuries, of a class of rich *mezzadria* tenants, who distinguish themselves from the less well off and the poorer ones.¹⁷ And from these latter how many, we might add, from being *mezzadria* tenants or members of *mezzadria* families passed ("fell" in the view of their contemporaries and themselves) to the rank of daily worker, with increasing frequency during the 19th century.

The worsening of additional clauses in the contract, moreover, was only minimally responsible for increased work load required of the families in this period. New and more exacting kinds of work derived from the new technical and farming innovations which the owner or the *fattore* introduced, often during the 19th century, in close relationship with national and international market trends and with the correlated tendencies in agricultural prices. As is well known, in the decades following the Restoration, for example, cereals suffered only an initial, albeit dramatic, low period in the 1820s, from which they recovered much more quickly than wine or oil. These last products are among the least tied to either tenant family or owner self-sufficiency and among the most important, from an economic point of view, which entered the trading circuit from the *podere*. The difficulties of farms whose revenue came, to a considerable extent, from tree produce, did not derive, moreover, only from the low prices which wine and oil maintained for over twenty years, but also - from the 1850s onwards - from a series of deadly illnesses which

affected the vine above all. The price of cattle, industrial crops such as hemp, as well as revenue from raw silk production (in this sector, at least up until the onset of pebrine disease in the mid 19th century) maintained in general highly remunerative levels.

On the basis of this, the *poderi* were reorganised and transformed with regard to crops: more space for hemp and livestock in the Emilian plain; in Tuscany, continuous and patient attempts and experiments to improve the quality of wine and olive oil produced in the *fattorie*, in order to establish the produce on internal and external markets. Everywhere, moreover, the landowners of the *mezzadria* area, not dissimilarly from exponents of the same class in other European countries, engaged considerable capital in enterprises which had the aim of improving trade circuits (repair or re-building of roads and bridges, opening of railway lines). Other innovations, in agriculture itself, tended to save on the land factor through the adoption of more intensive rotation and the disappearance of fallow land.

All the crop transformations mentioned had one common element: they could be introduced without upsetting the already present system of production and they were highly labour-intensive. In the mid 19th century, in concerns with mixed crop, field and tree (not to mention woodland and pasture land activity), crop operations and agricultural produce transformation kept the tenant families busy without interruption the whole year round, as even a schematic calendar shows.

This model of continuous labour force utilisation is the very premise behind survival of *mezzadria*. The demand for labour was not, however, continuous the whole year round. Even the *podere mezzadrile* had its peak periods of agricultural work, which even the total engagement of the family could not cope with. A typical example of this situation is given by the cultivation cycle for hemp, a crop as demanding in work for the tenant family as it was distant from their alimentary requirements, and therefore a point of contention between the tenant and the owner.¹⁸ The balance, in fact, between the needs of the *podere* in terms of crop and the possibilities of labour supply on the family's part appears to be a secular exercise in finding a optimum allocation of productive resources carried out by the owner or his representatives without, seemingly, a great deal of success. The reason for this lack of success was due - in all probability - to the owner's overestimation of parameters - the size of the *podere* and its potential agricultural production, in the first place - compared with the size and alimentary needs of a tenant family considered suitable for such parameters. Thus, the two elements - *podere* and family - which ideally should have found an equilibrium, only managed to do so from time to time, and thanks also to adjustments made by the opening of reciprocal credits and debts between owner and worker and, above all, to a

CALENDAR OF MAIN WORKS IN THE PODERE MEZZADRILE *

	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Field crops	<i>digging for first year rotation</i> sowing broad beans, peas vetch, grain mixture and barley	<i>digging for first year rotation</i> sowing March crops (broad beans, March corn)	sowing fields to grass first furrowing for maize March sowing	sowing maize and beans weeding corn seattering broomcorn for fodder	weeding maize hoeing maize cutting fodder crops	2nd hoeing maize hay gathering cutting corn	cutting corn moving corn to threshing floor threshing corn tilling corn fields 2nd cutting fodder crops sowing beans and turnip	<i>threshing remainder</i> tilling corn fields Autumn sowing fertiliser to fields topping maize	maize harvest husking maize ploughing fields for seeds sowing turnip broom corn and flax	sowing beans sowing corn	sowing corn fodder	<i>digging first year rotation</i>
Tree crops	ditch-making for vines	<i>pruning vines</i> layer reproduction for vines	<i>pruning vines</i> vine and fruit planting fruit tree grafting	<i>pruning olives</i> vine and off-shoot planting digging of planted borders	<i>spraying vines</i> turning low vines and tying down of shoots	2nd spraying vines	<i>spraying vines</i>	spraying diseased vines	<i>grape harvest</i> (end month)	<i>grape harvest</i> stripping vines	<i>olive and acorn gathering</i> initial pruning vines	ditching and digging
Processing of crops			decanting of wine	decanting of wine	<i>silkworm breeding</i>	<i>silk worm breeding</i>	cutting flax and hemp	<i>macerating flax and hemp</i>	<i>wine making</i>	<i>wine making</i>		<i>oil making</i>
Industrial crops and breedings			sowing hemp (mid month)	sowing hemp silkworm breeding (start)							<i>digging for hemp</i>	digging for hemp pig butchering

* The operations in italics are the most important and absorbing.

considerable amount of adjusting and change within the tenant family in terms of adapting, as far as possible, its biological characteristics and tendencies to the needs of the productive unit in which it was inserted.

In recent years, studies on the *mezzadria* family have among other things pointed out those very mechanisms by which the family tried to maintain its suitability for the *podere*, and avoid being replaced. Such mechanisms consisted of the inclusion/expulsion of collateral members, of bringing forward or delaying the marriage of a lateral branch (brothers, sisters), of taking on *garzoni*, fixed wage-earning daily workers employed by the family and who lived with them, or of recruitment of occasional daily workers, most of whom had been brought up in *mezzadria* families. Another way of adjusting was the mutual exchange of labour, in other words, *mezzadria* families helping one another out at peak times: mowing, threshing, grape harvest, carried out by groups of neighbouring families, one *podere* after another, each a time of reunion as well as a bond of solidarity. In this way the owner's strategy was anticipated and in many cases neutralised.

If the internal flexibility and elasticity of the family still allowed its contradictions to remain dormant over the centuries of its establishment and in those moments when the contract offered, in any case, a guarantee of economic stability, these contradictions awoke violently in the face of a more complex and lively economic system and in the presence of alternative employment, above all in the secondary and tertiary sectors. Their appearance also coincides, in time, with a breaking point reached by the internal and social mechanisms of the *mezzadria* family.

From the final decades of the 19th century, the agricultural population began to move out of the *mezzadria* area not only, as before, towards the rapidly growing small trading and industrial towns, but also towards other nations, creating a trend of long-distance emigration, until then unknown to *mezzadria* zones, which for centuries had managed to retain within them the labour force which they had created. The reason behind this phenomenon was the fact that labour alone - even the skilled labour of the *mezzadria* tenant - was no longer competitive with respect to the progress which had been achieved by other agricultural systems, based on more fertile soil and on the possibility of exploiting scientific and technical inventions suitable for the temperate zone regions of the peninsula (and especially the plain areas) and which ill suited the geological and pedological characteristics and crop systems of the arid, clay soil of central Italy. In this period the *mezzadria* family became more complex,¹⁹ but this complexity seems more an element of weakness rather than strength, since it no longer combines with a change in the organisation of production. The case of Tuscany exemplifies this. In the 19th century not only did families grow in size (which was to be expected

given the heavy work load on the *podere*) but they also underwent a structural transformation. Within the family there is an increase in the number of male and female members remaining single, as a permanent status; the presence of more productive units instead of units which only consumed was the last line of defense against the risk of expulsion from the *podere*. The appearance of such a strategy, however, is evidence that the *mezzadria* parabola had reached its downward phase: the *mezzadria* family gives up the rearing of new forces for a future on the *podere* which with its prospects is no longer a "family" hope.

NOTES

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