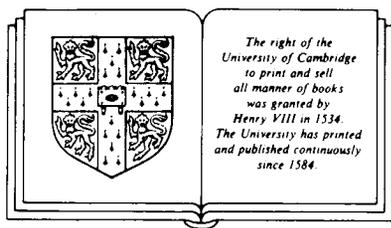


An island for itself

*Economic development and social change
in late medieval Sicily*

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To R.A. and M.W.E.

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1. Introduction. *The historiography and the sources*

A problem that has haunted the Italian nation since its inception is that of the origins and causes of the current economic and social disparities between North and South. For a long time it has been assumed that the answer to the problem – known as the *questione meridionale*, the southern question – could be found in the Middle Ages. There is, indeed, a general consensus that the economy of southern Italy or *Mezzogiorno* (which includes Sicily and Sardinia and borders on central Tuscany to the north) was permanently overtaken by that of central and northern Italy at some point during the high or late Middle Ages.

In this book I suggest a very different interpretation. Taking late medieval Sicily as my example, I argue that the region showed considerable economic, demographic and social dynamism, and that it provides an important test-case for a more general theory of economic development in late medieval Europe as a whole. Contrary to prevailing views that the period was one of economic stagnation or contraction, I suggest that the main result of the late medieval social and economic crisis was to increase regional specialization and integration, which in turn provided the base for the demographic and economic upsurge of the late fifteenth century. However, opportunities for specialization were not pursued in identical fashion throughout late medieval Europe. Each regional ‘path to development’ was shaped by that region’s specific constellation of social institutions defining access to markets and trade. Institutional structures might be more or less flexible, more or less conducive to long-term economic growth. As a result of the crisis, therefore, economic specialization *between* regions also increased, although to a far lesser degree. The late medieval European economy, I suggest, must be examined comparatively by studying the

relations between regional institutional structures, and economic development and growth.

Before addressing these problems more closely, however, we must briefly examine the historiographical tradition within which the debate on southern Italian backwardness is set. Some awareness of the debate's general thrust is necessary, if only because readers unversed in the historiography might otherwise find some of what I shall say either self-evident or obscure. In addition, although the debate is shaped by national historiographical and political traditions, its thrust goes far deeper. The *Mezzogiorno* provides a testing-ground for some of the most recent and widely-held theories about the origins and development of capitalism, which state that large parts of medieval and early modern Europe – southern Italy, parts of Spain and much of eastern Europe – were blocked in their development by 'colonial' exploitation through international trade.¹

The main current approaches to the origins of the *questione meridionale* can be traced back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² The first approach, which might be termed geo-historical, denied that southern Italy had ever had a golden period: the area had *always* lagged behind its neighbours. The reasons for such backwardness were geographic, climatic and sometimes racial; they were either immutable, or responded only extremely slowly to change.

A second approach concentrated on the impact of political developments and social institutions on long-term social and economic performance. According to one version, decline in the South began with the Norman conquest in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The Normans introduced feudal relations in political and social life, and

¹ For recent statements on this theme see C. M. Cipolla, *Il fiorino e il quattrino: la politica monetaria a Firenze nel 1300*, p. 14; A. Furió ed., *València, un mercat medieval*, pp. 7–23; J. Edwards, "Development" and "underdevelopment" in the western Mediterranean: The case of Córdoba and its region in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries"; M. Balard ed., *Etat et colonisation au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance*; R. H. Britnell, 'England and northern Italy in the early fourteenth century: the economic contrasts'; A. Guarducci ed., *Sviluppo e sottosviluppo in Europa e fuori d'Europa dal secolo XIII alla Rivoluzione industriale*. Theories of 'colonialism' are also commonly applied to eastern Europe, in particular Poland; see W. Kula, *An economic theory of the feudal system. Towards a model of the Polish economy 1500–1800*. See also below, chapter 8.

² G. Galasso, 'Considerazioni intorno alla storia del Mezzogiorno in Italia', is the best overview of the debate.

adopted a strongly anti-urban policy. They were therefore responsible for the destruction of a budding bourgeoisie which was developing in cities like Amalfi, Salerno, Naples and elsewhere along the lines of the northern Italian communes.³

A German historian, Alfred Doren, stressing the importance of *regional* institutions for economic growth, argued in a similar way that the main reason for the South's economic stagnation was its lack of independent city-states.⁴ Monarchy, he thought, had transformed the southern, feudal countryside into a centralized, bureaucratic state; instead of developing their own independent ('autarchic') territories as in northern Italy, southern cities 'were fitted into the wider territory of the state as members of a single organism, and as a rule enjoyed very limited autarchy'.⁵ Doren was thus suggesting that politically and institutionally independent cities were necessary for long-term economic development. But although the role of the communes in northern Italian economic development is nearly a historiographical axiom, Doren's hypothesis about the role of towns in southern Italy has never been seriously tested;⁶ I shall do so in chapter 3.

A different and more influential politico-institutional view was expressed by the philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce in 1925. Croce argued that a political event – known as the Sicilian Vespers of 1282 – 'marked the beginning of much trouble and little greatness'.⁷ Between the late eleventh century and 1282, southern Italy and Sicily were unified under the same crown: first under the Normans, later under the German Hohenstaufen, and finally, between 1266 and 1282, under a cadet branch of the French Angevins. In April 1282, a popular uprising expelled the Angevins from Sicily. In their stead the Sicilians called on Peter III, king of Aragon and count of Barcelona, to establish an independent monarchy (Peter's claims to the Sicilian throne were based on his marriage to Constance, the granddaughter of Frederick II). War with the Angevins was inevitable. The new kingdom of Sicily and what became the kingdom of Naples (but was still named kingdom of Sicily until

³ Galasso, 'Le città campane nell'alto medioevo', pp. 134–5; S. Tramontana, 'La monarchia normanna e sveva', pp. 593–6.

⁴ A. Doren, *Storia economica dell'Italia nel Medio Evo*, pp. 361–82.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 213–14.

⁶ S. R. Epstein, 'Cities, regions and the late medieval crisis: Sicily and Tuscany compared', 12–15.

⁷ B. Croce, *History of the Kingdom of Naples*, pp. 15–16.

1458) warred intermittently until the mid-fifteenth century. The two kingdoms were briefly reunited under the crown of Aragon between 1442 and 1458; final unity came only after the Spanish victory against the French in 1506.

Croce believed that political separation between Sicily and the mainland following the Vespers had disastrous long-term consequences. The separation sapped the financial and military energies of what, united, was the wealthiest monarchy in western Europe at the time. Instead of expanding towards the Levant against the Arabs, the Anjou spent their kingdom's resources trying to reconquer Sicily from the Aragonese. In addition, the separation of Sicily from the mainland prevented different southern regions from specializing and complementing each other's deficiencies: after 1282, grain-deficient areas in southern Italy could no longer rely on Sicilian supplies.⁸ Although the expulsion of the Anjou from Sicily opened the door to later Spanish claims to southern Italy, which had the merit of reuniting the South under one rule, the benefits of foreign rule ended at this point.

A third approach to southern Italian backwardness emphasizes the economic impact of long-distance trade between the North and the *Mezzogiorno*. The empirical base for this view was provided by a medievalist, Georges Yver, in a book published in 1903 on the kingdom of Naples under Charles I and Charles II of Anjou.⁹ Yver, who was only incidentally concerned with current debates on the *questione meridionale*, wished to demonstrate the beneficial effects of Angevin rule in the South. In fact, he initiated one of the main tenets of current views of southern Italian underdevelopment, namely the dominance of foreign trade and foreign merchants over the southern economy. The main exponent of this 'commercialist' view, however, was Gino Luzzatto, who believed that exchange and economic 'complementarity' between the North and the *Mezzogiorno* was the main source of southern Italian economic change before industrialization. Until quite recently, Luzzatto's implied assumption that Italy was commercially unified before the nineteenth century has been accepted by most historians.

⁸ M. de Bouard, 'Problèmes de subsistances dans un état médiéval: le marché et les prix des céréales au royaume angevin de Sicile (1266–1282)'. This argument seems to have applied primarily to the southern mainland: Sicily at the time does not seem to have imported much from the mainland.

⁹ G. Yver, *Le commerce et les marchands dans l'Italie méridionale au XIIIe et au XIVe siècle*.

Luzzatto began by drawing a sharp contrast between predominantly 'agricultural' and predominantly 'industrial' regions. Southern Italy was always 'agricultural', whereas many regions in central and northern Italy were 'industrial'. Because southerners did not engage in foreign trade and lacked the northern Italian entrepreneurial spirit, the South became 'dependent' on northern Italy for its manufacturing, and was forced to specialize in agricultural staples for export. Furthermore, whereas northern exports indicated a strong 'industrial' base, southern surpluses were the result of underpopulation and low living standards. 'Dependence' was not, however, restricted to the *Mezzogiorno*. It existed in any region where there was no great commercial and industrial city. Even 'marginal' regions of northern and central Italy – Piedmont, the Romagna, the Marche and Umbria – became 'dependent' on foreign credit and trade.¹⁰

Although there have been few new theories advanced to explain the *questione* since Luzzatto's time, there has been one major methodological innovation. This has involved grafting Luzzatto's analysis onto the new stem of development economics which emerged after World War II in the wake of decolonization.¹¹ In the context of our debate, the most influential theory of 'underdevelopment' has been that of economic dualism. Despite the fact that the theory has no rigorous and generally accepted definition,¹² it is usually employed with two distinct meanings. Economic dualism is often used to denote economic relations between two distinct territories, relations that are also sometimes described as 'complementary'. But the theory of economic dualism is more usually applied to a single territory whose economy is divided into two sectors. The manufacturing (or 'advanced') sector, which is very small, works according to profit-maximizing rules; the agricultural (or 'backward') sector, which includes the majority of the population, operates according to a 'paternalist and quasi-feudalist regime', and the marginal productivity of labour is significantly lower

¹⁰ G. Luzzatto, *Storia economica dell'età moderna e contemporanea*, I, pp. 103–15; Luzzatto, *Breve storia economica dell'Italia medievale. Dalla caduta dell'Impero romano al principio del Cinquecento*, pp. 202–9.

¹¹ A review of the themes and literature of development economics can be found in A. O. Hirschmann, 'The rise and decline of development economics'; I. M. D. Little, *Economic development. Theory, policy and international relations*.

¹² R. Hodson and R. L. Kaufman, 'Economic dualism: a critical review', 727.

than in manufacturing. The 'backward' sector in a dual economy is poorly, or not at all, commercialized. In addition, there is 'factor immobility' (of either capital or labour or both) between the two sectors: for institutional or cultural reasons, capital is not invested in agriculture and labour does not move freely between agriculture and manufacturing.¹³ An important but often overlooked consequence of the latter assumption is to rule out capital accumulation and productivity increases in the agricultural ('backward') sector.

One reason why the concept of a 'dual economy' has been so successful among historians lies in its close parallels with the influential view of the role of towns and long-distance trade for pre-industrial, and particularly medieval, economic development. According to this view (whose exponents include Adam Smith, Max Weber and Henri Pirenne), medieval economic and social change originated with long-distance merchants, whose 'capitalist', progressive outlook distinguished them from contemporary 'traditional' and stable-state societies. Merchants mobilized large volumes of capital and achieved high profits; they were especially well endowed with entrepreneurial skills; their mobility and profit motivation inclined them towards cultural and technical innovation. Long-distance traders were thus in a unique position to promote economic growth. In this dualist scheme, town-country relations are viewed in similar terms, towns being external to the backward, feudal, agrarian economy to which they convey economic dynamism. Peasants are thus purely subsistence-oriented, and enter into trade relations only through external pressure or inducement.¹⁴

Most recent interpretations of the medieval southern Italian economy have taken a dualist approach. The first to do so was Philip Jones,¹⁵ who combined it with a theory of 'colonial' dependence

¹³ R. Kanbur and J. McIntosh, 'Dual economies'. The model of dualism in a single economy was first outlined by W. A. Lewis, 'Economic development with unlimited supplies of labour'.

¹⁴ A. Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, Book 3, chapter 4; M. Weber, *Economy and society*, II, chapter 16; H. Pirenne, *Medieval cities, their origins, and the revival of trade*. For critiques of this scheme see J. Merrington, 'Town and country in the transition to capitalism'; R. Brenner, 'The origins of capitalist development: a critique of neo-Smithian Marxism'. I discuss peasant economic strategies in chapters 3 and 4 below.

¹⁵ P. Jones, 'Medieval agrarian society in its prime: Italy', p. 348; Jones, 'Economia e società nell'Italia medievale: la leggenda della borghesia', p. 205.

based on long-distance trade. While stressing that dualism was mainly due to geographical factors,¹⁶ Jones has more recently included some traditional institutional elements – the absence of urban ‘freedom’, the predominance of aristocratic landowners over a commercial and manufacturing ‘bourgeoisie’ – to explain medieval southern backwardness.¹⁷ ‘Dependence’ arose because competition from foreign industry either destroyed or inhibited the growth of domestic manufactures in the South; as a result, the local economy began to specialize in the production of agricultural staples for export.

‘Only in the primary sector – the export of foodstuffs and primary materials – the South, characteristically, *like all underdeveloped regions*, contributed appreciably to international exchange’, writes Jones in an echo of Luzzatto. He continues,

during the Middle Ages, *as later*, ‘colonialism’ in some form was inherent in the process of economic expansion, at least insofar as this was based on international trade. According to this wider point of view, there was nothing special in the relationship that developed between the North and the *Mezzogiorno*. It was instead, once again, a prototype or model. Similar contrasts and similar links between developed and underdeveloped areas took place in the whole of Europe (just as, later, in the whole world), under the differentiating influence of economic expansion . . . In economic terms, actually, as also socially and politically, the ‘North’ and *Mezzogiorno* were something more than mere geographic expressions: they symbolized relations which were present, more or less openly, in the whole peninsula.¹⁸

This passage summarizes three central features of current theories of the origins of the *questione*. First, the South’s economy developed under the stimulus and constraints of agricultural exports. Second, agricultural exports are the hallmark of a ‘colonized’ economy, particularly when manufactured goods are imported in exchange. And finally, ‘medieval Italy offered the perfect prototype

¹⁶ Jones, ‘Medieval agrarian society’, pp. 340–2; Jones, ‘Economia e società’, pp. 204, 215; R. Romano, ‘La storia economica. Dal secolo XIV al Settecento’, pp. 1813–15.

¹⁷ Jones, ‘Economia e società’, pp. 232–3. See also J. H. Pryor, ‘Foreign policy and economic policy: the Angevins of Sicily and the economic decline of southern Italy, 1266–1343’.

¹⁸ Jones, ‘Economia e società’, pp. 205, 206 (my italics).

of a 'dual' or 'bisectoral' economy: one part was backward, the other was advanced'.¹⁹ As claimed previously by Luzzatto, this relationship existed throughout Italy, between different regions and individual cities. Even in the most advanced, mercantile urban economies – of which perhaps less than a dozen existed – an extensive 'backward' sector could be found.²⁰

The first of these features is the point of departure for most medieval and early modern historians of southern Italy,²¹ and I discuss it at length in the body of this book. The second point would seem to derive from the first, apparently because agriculture is assumed to be *always* less productive than manufacturing. In fact, there are no *a priori* reasons for deciding whether this is the case, or even whether agriculture will be more or less capital-intensive than manufacturing at a particular level of technological development.²²

The third point – that a situation of economic dualism existed both between North and South and within the most developed northern Italian urban economies – is the most problematic, because it applies the concept of 'dualism' indiscriminately to both *territorial* and *sectoral* differences. There are problems with both senses of dualism in the context of the *questione*.

Although the concept of geographical dualism is even more vague than that of sectoral dualism, it does imply stable, long-term and organic relations of 'complementarity' between two distinct territories, relations that shape each economy through competitive forces. Economic 'complementarity' thus presupposes the existence of a unified market. Emilio Sereni and Luciano Cafagna have, however, shown that a unified market in Italy did not exist before the 1870s. At most there existed commercial relations between single regions, or between single northern cities and single southern

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

²¹ For Sicily see, for example, I. Peri, 'Economia agricola e crisi nella Sicilia medioevale. Interpretazioni e prospettive storiografiche', pp. 96, 98–9; V. D'Alessandro, 'Città e campagna in Sicilia nell'età angioino-aragonese', pp. 202–3; C. Trasselli, *Storia dello zucchero siciliano*, p. 14; O. Cancila, *Impresa redditi mercato nella Sicilia moderna*, pp. vii–viii, 263. For the kingdom of Naples see A. Grohmann, *Le fiere del Regno di Napoli in età aragonese*, pp. 262–8; A. Leone, *Profili economici della Campania aragonese*, pp. 49–51, 63, 73.

²² In the period 1761–1830, for example, English agriculture was more capital-intensive than industry (G. N. von Tunzelmann, 'Technical progress', p. 159).

regions. Moreover, these relations were restricted to only a few products (grain, wine, silk) and were fairly easily interrupted.²³

The concept of geographical dualism applied in this way can be criticized further. To draw a contrast between what were actually 'mere geographic expressions', North and South, presupposes a lack of significant regional economic variation within the *Mezzogiorno*. Medievalists are at pains to differentiate between and within the regions of central and northern Italy, but they often view southern Italy – stretching from Lazio to Sicily, from Sardinia to the Puglie – as being comparatively undifferentiated, and thus as having few opportunities for specialization for the internal (southern Italian) market.²⁴ Little attention has been given to one of the most significant developments of the late medieval European economy, regional specialization and growth; these are discussed in chapters 3–5.

The concept of sectoral dualism raises different problems. Its main assumptions – the existence of 'surplus labour', the lack of commercialization, and the presence of economically oppressive institutions in the 'backward' sector – have never been seriously tested for any medieval Italian region. Partly because of this, the definition of what constituted the 'advanced' medieval sectors is deduced arbitrarily from dualist assumptions; for example, Jones posits that the luxury textile industries of certain northern Italian communes were more 'developed' than the cheaper manufacturing industries producing for domestic markets.²⁵ This issue is discussed in more detail in chapters 5 and 6.

There are two major problems with the way the dualist model has been used by historians. First, although the dualist model was devised to explain economic *growth*, historians have tended to use it to describe conditions of permanent economic *stagnation*. Second, the dualist model itself fails to specify the institutional transformations whereby a dual, asymmetrical economy turns into

²³ E. Sereni, 'Mercato nazionale e accumulazione capitalistica nell'Unità italiana'; L. Cafagna, *Dualismo e sviluppo nella storia d'Italia*, pp. 183–220; A. Del Monte and A. Giannola, *Il Mezzogiorno nell'economia italiana*, pp. 392–6. See also below, chapter 8.

²⁴ See, however, Yver, *Commerce*, pp. 396–8; Grohmann, *Fiere*; R. Comba, 'Le origini medievali dell'assetto insediativo moderno nelle campagne italiane', pp. 393–404. For the early modern period see A. Lepre, *Storia del Mezzogiorno d'Italia*, I, pp. 19–46.

²⁵ Jones, 'La storia economica', pp. 1480–92.

an integrated one. The model does not account for economic *development* and institutional change.²⁶ The assumption of institutional stasis or equilibrium is to say the least problematic, for it clearly does not apply to human societies over long stretches of time, and it produces inappropriate generalizations about the character of institutions. To state, for example, that serfdom and indebtedness produce dualistic distortions in labour markets without considering the wider context in which these institutions are set, makes it impossible to explain why apparently similar institutions can lead to very different outcomes, not excluding economic development – the contrast between medieval England and early modern Poland is a classic example.

More recently, work on medieval southern Italian economies has tended to focus on the mechanisms of *exchange* which are supposed to have caused ‘colonized’ and ‘colonizing’ areas to emerge. In 1977, David Abulafia published a book whose title, *The Two Italies*, made clear reference to the dualist approach developed by Jones. Abulafia addressed the question of the ‘origins’ of southern backwardness by examining Genoese, and to a lesser extent Venetian, twelfth-century commercial contracts involving Sicily and southern Italy. He argued that by c.1180, northern Italian (Genoese) merchants had established a powerful commercial network based on the exchange of high-value cloths from northern Europe for grain, cotton and other agricultural goods from Sicily and the southern mainland.²⁷

In this work, Abulafia paid little attention to domestic conditions in the South, or to the volume of foreign trade relative to domestic output. His emphasis on long-distance trade also led him to solve the problem of the relation between political action and economic development by according a determining influence to the political and fiscal choices of the Norman kings. In later work, Abulafia has addressed domestic conditions in the South more closely, reaffirming his earlier view that Norman policies to a large extent gave shape to the southern Italian economy, and that Italy as a whole was structured dualistically on the exchange of southern

²⁶ Kanbur and McIntosh, ‘Dual economies’, p. 119.

²⁷ D. S. H. Abulafia, *The two Italies: economic relations between the Norman Kingdom of Sicily and the northern communes*.

unprocessed raw materials for northern manufacturing and financial services.²⁸

Abulafia's analysis was extended to later periods by two French historians, Maurice Aymard and Henri Bresc, who together have done most in recent years to establish the relevance for the economic development of Italy, and in particular Sicily, of theories of underdevelopment. Although Aymard has worked mainly on the early modern period, his work has major implications for medieval historians. Aymard began with a simple theory of economic dualism in which Sicily played the role of both a 'backward' and a 'colonial' country.²⁹ More recently, he has sought to adapt to the Italian case Witold Kula's model for early modern Poland.³⁰ By integrating these views with Immanuel Wallerstein's 'dependency theory', he has produced a model of Sicilian and southern Italian underdevelopment within a more general theory of Italy's transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production.³¹

Like Luzzatto and Jones, Aymard's main theoretical premise is that 'the inequalities of Italy's development form a whole, the coherence of which must be explained'.³² Within this whole, the South was dominated by the northern 'commercial and manufacturing metropolises of the "developed quadrangle"' (Venice, Milan, Genoa and Florence); economic domination by the North permanently blocked the South's development.³³

By defining capitalist development in terms of interregional commercial exploitation, however, Aymard is led into a number of inconsistencies. The most significant of these concerns the nature of the integration of Italy's national market which (as we have seen) Sereni and Cafagna argue was of no real significance before the 1870s. On the one hand, Aymard is led by his premises to emphasize

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 'Conclusion'; Abulafia, 'Southern Italy and the Florentine economy, 1265-1370'; Abulafia, 'The crown and the economy under Roger II and his successors'.

²⁹ M. Aymard, 'Production, commerce et consommation des draps de laine du XIIe au XVIIe siècle (Prato, 10-16 avril 1970)'; Aymard, 'Amministrazione feudale e trasformazioni strutturali tra '500 e '700', 22.

³⁰ Kula, *Economic theory*; Aymard, 'Amministrazione feudale'; Aymard, 'Il commercio dei grani nella Sicilia del '500'.

³¹ Aymard, 'La transizione dal feudalesimo al capitalismo'; I. Wallerstein, *The modern world-system*.

³² Aymard, 'Transizione', pp. 1177, 1183-5.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 1143, 1145, 1147, 1158, 1169-70, 1179, 1182, 1189. See also Kula, 'Il sottosviluppo economico in una prospettiva storica'.

the unity of the 'national' market and the regional division of labour.³⁴ On the other hand, he confuses regional division of labour (specialization) with interregional dualism ('developed' versus 'underdeveloped' regions).³⁵ He writes of a structure of juxtaposed regional markets,³⁶ claiming that regional markets were economically more significant than interregional trade,³⁷ hinting at the 'speculative' and irregular nature of such trade, particularly of grain,³⁸ and mentioning in passing that a national market did not in fact exist.³⁹ The role played by interregional trade for development in the North is never spelled out – a considerable weakness (common to most dualist approaches), since theories of 'dependence' necessarily apply to both parties involved.⁴⁰

Aymard's assumption of the crucial role of interregional trade for pre-industrial Italian development collapses as soon as he confronts the relatively paltry volume of trade involved. By defining capitalism as trade on markets, Aymard cannot explain the apparent capitalist *regression*, the severe *contraction* in interregional trade which occurred in Italy from the late sixteenth century,⁴¹ and the subsequent 'seventeenth-century crisis'. Finally, just as Aymard is unable to shed light on the original process of transition to dependence (the most he can say about the emergence of regional inequalities is that it occurred some time between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries),⁴² his structural theory of dependence is incapable of explaining the process of transition to capitalism.⁴³

On this front, Henri Bresc has more to say. Bresc's important study of Sicilian 'economy and society' between c.1300 and c.1450, the result of two decades of research, is set firmly within the French tradition of the regional *thèse*. It is a 'total history', that wishes to uncover 'the medieval roots of modern Sicily . . . of the obsessive

³⁴ Aymard, 'Transizione', pp. 1145, 1147, 1158, 1179, 1182.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1169–70.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1145, 1172.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1183–5, 1186, 1188.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1163.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1175; see p. 1161 for the cloth market.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1147 and n. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1180, 1183–5, 1186.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 1145, 1158.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 1187.

presence of the prestige and values of an urban aristocracy which rested on the “fief”, in other words the *latifondo*.⁴⁴

Bresc's work is the first study of its kind of a southern Italian region, and is also the most consistent attempt to apply current theories of underdevelopment, ‘colonialism’ and ‘dependency’ to a medieval European region. Bresc's answer to the question of Sicilian underdevelopment raises, more clearly than any of his predecessors, issues concerning the relationship between political, institutional and long-term economic change, which are central to the historiography of the *Mezzogiorno*.

Bresc argues that, as a result of Norman economic and fiscal policies, Sicily began slowly to specialize in grain monoculture for export.⁴⁵ The Muslim rebellion of the 1230s and 1240s and its defeat by Frederick II marked ‘the triumph of an extensive, speculative economy and of grain monoculture for export’ over agricultural and industrial differentiation based on Muslim technology.⁴⁶ This outcome was due to the ‘capacity of the Sicilian ruling classes to develop an organically conceived latifundium’, and found parallels in other Mediterranean countries subjected to ‘colonial feudalism’.⁴⁷ A further, more crucial break in Sicilian history occurred with the uprising of the Vespers of 1282. The Vespers definitively entrenched the island's role as a purveyor of grain to the western Mediterranean in ‘unequal’ exchange for manufactured goods (mainly cloth) it no longer produced.⁴⁸ Not only was Sicily forced to increase grain exports to pay for its military defence against Angevin attack from the southern mainland; the country also lost any opportunities to engage in fruitful trade with the southern mainland and to exploit economic complementarities for specialization. Benedetto Croce's dictum that the Vespers sounded southern Italy's death knell is thereby confirmed.⁴⁹

After 1300, Bresc states, ‘the lack of vast changes and the cyclical character of developments justify a static approach to an economy

⁴⁴ *UM*, p. 1. See the review by E. I. Mineo, ‘Nazione, periferia, sottosviluppo. La Sicilia medievale di Henri Bresc’.

⁴⁵ H. Bresc, ‘Reti di scambio locale e interregionale nell'Italia dell'alto Medioevo’, p. 157.

⁴⁶ *UM*, p. 16. See below, chapter 4.

⁴⁷ *UM*, pp. 18, 20–1.

⁴⁸ This view was first developed by Carmelo Trasselli; see Epstein, ‘The textile industry and the foreign cloth trade in late medieval Sicily (1300–1500): a “colonial relationship”?’’, 141–2.

⁴⁹ *UM*, pp. 576, 917; see Croce, *History*, pp. 15–16.

and society that are blocked, the eternal return of the prestiges and values of a world which after the end of domestic mercantile society was unable to produce an entrepreneurial environment'.⁵⁰ Bresc thus combines two only apparently conflicting intellectual traditions. On the one hand, we find Croce's preoccupation with the political and intellectual élite, interpreting southern Italian history as the outcome of ruling-class choice. On the other hand, we have the structuralist theory of Third World economic 'dependency' as elaborated by Samir Amin, André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein. The two approaches have this in common, that they both dispense with social conflict and domestic institutions. As Bresc states approvingly,

[for dependency theorists] the articulation between modes of production, between centre and periphery, was the result of a universal law. The violent capture, simultaneously, of the centres of decision-making, of consumption and production of an archaic economy . . . condemned the periphery to long-term backwardness, now renamed dependence.⁵¹

Bresc's uneasy combination of extreme voluntarism – whereby Sicilian economic structures emerged from deliberate choices by the feudal aristocracy, which imposed its economic and cultural values on the 'Sicilian people' – with equally extreme structural determinism, means that he is effectively prevented from addressing the relation between political and economic change.

In this context, one can also object to Bresc's use of the documentary evidence. Because Bresc assumes from the start that no significant change occurred in Sicily's domestic economy, he presents his evidence *en bloc* for the entire period 1300–1450 with little regard for change over time. Evolution and change is allowed only for sectors linked to foreign markets.⁵²

To a certain degree, Bresc's arguments depend on his choice of written sources. His reliance on notarial records for most of the economic analysis is particularly problematic. Although in recent decades the use by historians of the western Mediterranean of private, mainly notarial documents has caused a veritable method-

⁵⁰ *UM*, p. 21.

⁵¹ *UM*, p. 3. See S. Amin, *Unequal exchange*; A. G. Frank, *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America. Historical studies of Chile and Brazil*; Wallerstein, *The modern world-system*; J. G. Palma, 'Dependency'.

⁵² *UM*, chapters 6, 8–11.