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Direzione: Luigi De Matteo, *e-mail:* ldematteo@alice.it.

Redazione: Storia economica c/o Daniela Ciccolella, CNR-ISSM, Via Cardinale Guglielmo Sanfelice 8, 80134 Napoli; *e-mail:* ciccolella@issm.cnr.it.

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SOMMARIO

ANNO XXI (2018) - n. 2

ARTICOLI E RICERCHE

- GIULIA SPALLACCI, *Il prestito a cambio marittimo ad Ancona nel XV secolo* p. 251
- AMEDEO LEPORE, *L'impresa González de la Sierra nel commercio atlantico: connessioni, traffici e ricchezze* » 277
- ROBERTO ROSSI, *Division of labour, salaries and productivity in Barcelona's indianas manufacture in the XVIII century* » 315
- GIOVANNI CECCARELLI, ALBERTO GRANDI, *La Guerra dei cloni. Un esempio precoce di tecnologie enologiche: i vini fortificati e il Marsala* » 341
- ANDREA GIUNTINI, *Il trasporto della posta per l'India nella prima metà del XIX secolo. Imprenditorialità e tecnologia nella storia della Overland Route* » 359
- MARIA CARMELA SCHISANI, *Dinamiche professionali e reti di relazioni di un 'uomo d'affari' di successo a Napoli nel periodo della prima globalizzazione. Domenico Gallotti (1831-1905)* » 379
- GIAN LUCA PODESTÀ, *The Empire as a Myth. Vital Space, Fascist Universalism, Demographic Planning and New Urban Lifestyles in the Italian Africa* » 415
- STEFANO MAGAGNOLI, *Le futurisme au service de la révolution. Artisti, politici tra risotto e spaghetti* » 441
- GIUSEPPE MORICOLA, *La formazione della «packaging community» in Italia. Il ruolo dell'Istituto Italiano Imballaggio negli anni del miracolo economico* » 459

SOMMARIO

NOTE E INTERVENTI

- FEDERICO SCRIBANTE, *Marcantonio Doria d'Angri: le pratiche commerciali e finanziarie di un mercante-banchiere genovese a Napoli tra Cinque e Seicento* » 479
- GIOVANNI FARESE, *An integral view of agriculture and development. Giorgio Sebreondi between comparative rural economics and human development in the 1950s* » 497
- ALESSANDRO MORSELLI, *Nascita e sviluppo delle banche centrali: un'analisi istituzionalista* » 505

RECENSIONI E SCHEDE

- FRANCESCO ALTAMURA, *Sindacalismo in camicia nera. L'organizzazione fascista dei lavoratori dell'agricoltura in Puglia e Lucania (1928-1943)*, Edizioni dal Sud, Bari-Milano 2018 (S. Gallo) » 529
- RENATA SABENE, *Lavoro e privilegio nella città eterna. Condizioni di vita e potere d'acquisto a Roma nel Settecento*, Edizioni Altravista, Broni (PV) 2017 (F. Scribante) » 531
- Storie di frodi. Intacchi, malversazioni e furti nei Monti di pietà e negli istituti caritatevoli tra Medioevo ed età moderna*, a cura di L. Righi, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018 (A. Clemente) » 533

AN *INTEGRAL* VIEW OF AGRICULTURE
AND DEVELOPMENT.
GIORGIO SEBREGONDI BETWEEN COMPARATIVE
RURAL ECONOMICS
AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE 1950s

In the 1950s, during Italy's transition from a mainly agricultural economy to a mainly industrial one, the Svimez was the most influential think tank on development in Italy. From 1949 to 1958 Giorgio Ceriani Sebregondi was the director of the newly established Sociological Department at Svimez, promoting comparative studies drawing on diverse international experiences. His views on agriculture leveraged on the role of community development, international cooperation, and the values of rural society. He participated in missions abroad and prepared plans for less developed countries like Greece, Iran and Somalia. His participation to international conferences and to the international community of development scholars contributed to the circulation of ideas, some of which later influenced father Le Bret and, via Le Bret, Pope Paul VI. His contribution has been largely overlooked since his premature death.

Agriculture, circulation of ideas, international development, postwar years, Southern Italy

Negli anni Cinquanta, durante la transizione dell'Italia da economia prevalentemente agricola a prevalentemente industriale, la Svimez è il più influente think tank sullo sviluppo in Italia. Lì Giorgio Ceriani Sebregondi istituisce una Sezione sociologica che studia i fattori e gli ambiti dello sviluppo con un approccio comparativo attento alle diverse esperienze internazionali. Le sue riflessioni sul ruolo integrale dell'agricoltura nel processo di sviluppo prendono le mosse dai bisogni delle comunità locali, dalle possibilità della cooperazione internazionale, dai valori delle società rurali. Sebregondi articola queste riflessioni in una serie di missioni all'estero in paesi arretrati e con diversi gradi di sviluppo, tra cui la Grecia, l'Iran, la Somalia. Contribuisce in varie forme alla circolazione internazionale delle idee, influenzando padre Le Bret e, attraverso di lui, papa Paolo VI. Morto a soli 41 anni, le sue idee sono state in larga parte dimenticate.

Agricoltura, circolazione delle idee, sviluppo internazionale, secondo dopoguerra, Mezzogiorno

1. *Introduction*

This paper seeks to explore the agricultural views – or, better, the role of agriculture in the development process – in the thought of Giorgio Sebreondi (1916-1958), an Italian pioneer of human development, and of social development in the postwar years.

Sometimes mentioned in connection with French Dominican father Louis-Joseph Lebret (1897-1966) and his circle “Économie et Humanisme”, with whom he was associated in the 1950s¹, the name of Sebreondi has been long overlooked due to his premature death in June 1958, at the age of 41, and to the scarcity of his papers. His memory has been kept alive thanks to the man who kept his papers thus keeping alive his intellectual legacy, Giuseppe De Rita, the founder and president of the CENSIS, Italy’s think tank on social investment.

Twenty-four papers by Sebreondi were collected and published eight years after his death, in 1965². Two books came out in 1990 and in 1998 respectively³. In 2017, an archival research has brought back to light new letters and new papers⁴.

This paper is structured as follows. Paragraph 2 presents the historical context in which Sebreondi lived and worked. Paragraph 3 runs through his short life. Paragraph 4 touches upon his views on agriculture and rural society. Paragraph 5 provides some concluding remarks and thoughts.

2. *The context*

Southern Italy is, at the end of the Second World War, the largest backward area in Western Europe. It is key both economically and politically. Economically, to test the ability of capital liberalism to spur

¹ P. HOUÉE, *Un éveilleur d’humanité: Louis-Joseph Lebret*, l’Atelier, Ivry-sur-Seine 1997.

² G. SEBREGONDI, *Sullo sviluppo della società italiana*, Boringhieri, Torino 1965.

³ *Credere nello sviluppo sociale. La lezione intellettuale di Giorgio Ceriani Sebreondi*, a cura di C.F. Casula, Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 1990; S. SANTAMAITA, *Non di solo pane. Lo sviluppo, la società, l’educazione nel pensiero di Giorgio Ceriani Sebreondi*, Fondazione Adriano Olivetti, Roma 1998.

⁴ G. FARESE, *Lo sviluppo come integrazione. Giorgio Ceriani Sebreondi e l’ingresso dell’Italia nella cultura internazionale dello sviluppo*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2017.

growth and development within the context of the Bretton Woods system and of renewed international cooperation. Politically, to fight back communism in the context of the Cold War. Not surprisingly then, the development of Southern Italy is a priority both for the national government led by the Christian Democrats and, in particular by Alcide De Gasperi (1881-1954), and the World Bank during the presidency of Eugene Robert Black (1898-1992), *i.e.* from the late 1940s, through the 1950s and to the early 1960s⁵.

In this new context, the Rome-based Association for the Development of Industry in Southern Italy (Svimez) plays an important role. Founded in 1946 by eminent Italian bankers, economists and policymakers, Svimez is *the* think tank on the development in Italy and advises the government and its ministers. The Ten Years Development Plan enacted in 1955 by the Finance Minister Ezio Vanoni (1903-1956) is drafted at Svimez.

The international relations of Svimez are equally important⁶. There is no foreign economist or delegation that does not pay a visit at Svimez, when in Rome. The IMF, the World Bank and other institutions, including of course the Rome-based FAO, all send experts to Svimez to gather useful insights⁷. French economist Robert Marjolin (1911-1986), Polish-born economist Paul Rosenstein Rodan (1902-1985), and Dutch economist and Nobel Prize winner Jan Tinbergen (1903-1994) all sit in the Board of Svimez. This is where Sebregondi works for ten years, from 1949 to 1958.

3. *A biographical sketch*

Sebregondi was born in 1916. He graduates in Law in 1939. He fights in the “Resistance” against Fascism and Nazism, joining the ranks of the Christian Left, a short-lived party on the left of the Christian Democrats and on the right of the Communists. He then joins the Communist party for some years and works first at IRI,

⁵ G. FARESE, P. SAVONA, *Il banchiere del mondo. Eugene Robert Black e l'ascesa della cultura dello sviluppo in Italia*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2014.

⁶ F. DANDOLO, *Cooperation and Investment for the Development of Southern Italy from a European and International Perspective, 1950-1960*, «The Journal of European Economic History», 3 (2017), pp. 121-141; cfr. Id., *Il Mezzogiorno fra divari e cooperazione internazionale. Informazioni Svimez e la cultura del nuovo meridionalismo (1948-1960)*, il Mulino, Bologna 2017.

⁷ FARESE, *Lo sviluppo come integrazione*.

the State-owned Institute for Industrial Reconstruction, with Pasquale Saraceno (1903-1991) and then at Ansaldo, a major industrial complex of the IRI group, with Angelo Saraceno. From 1949 to 1958, he works again with Pasquale Saraceno at Svimez.

There, Sebregondi establishes the Sociological Department, at a time when no Chair of Sociology exists in Italy. As Rosenstein Rodan puts it, it was essential «to gain an understanding of the workings of the Italian society for the success of all development programs which, as we all realize, are all too frequently narrowly conceived in economic terms, to the detriment of the vital social problems»⁸.

In the 1950s, Sebregondi heads technical assistance missions in Greece, in Iran, and in Somalia, a country which, as a former Italian colony, is under the UN-trusteeship of Italy. Being *the* Italian expert on Somalia, he is also member of the Italian delegation contributing to the drafting of the Treaty of Rome (1957), and, within the Treaty, advocating the association of colonies and former colonies to the Common Market⁹.

Sebregondi joins the intellectual circle of “Économie et Humanisme” led by father Lebreton, and takes part in its annual conferences, including one in São Paulo, Brasil, in 1954 where he makes acquaintance with Latin American economists¹⁰. Notably, in 1958, one of his papers appears on the «Cuaderno latinoamericano de economía humana», the journal of the Centre on Human economics in Montevideo, Uruguay.

He dies on June 24, 1958 at the age of 41 due to a disease contracted in Somalia.

4. *Ideas and models*

Working at the Association for the development of industry in Southern Italy, Sebregondi pays attention also to *agriculture*. This happens in the years of the transition of the Italian economy from a

⁸ Ivi, pp. 71-72.

⁹ FARESE, *Lo sviluppo come integrazione*.

¹⁰ M. RAMOS DE ANGELO, *Les Développeurs. Louis-Joseph Lebreton e a SAGMACS na formação de um grupo de ação para o planejamento urbano no Brasil*, Tese apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Escola de Engenharia de São Carlos, Universidade de São Paulo, 2010.

mainly agricultural to a mainly industrial one¹¹. He navigates through these years of economic and social change.

In particular, the year 1950 is a watershed. First, the Italian Parliament passes the Land Reform Bill, redistributing land and changing the economic and social landscape of Southern Italy. Second, a special Fund for Southern Italy (the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*) is established, drawing on the successful experience of the Tennessee Valley Authority, to channel the international loans of the World Bank¹².

In this context, in the early 1950s, Sebregondi thinks of a comparative rural economics. He looks at different areas and diverse international experiences, past and present.

First, he looks at Italy's land reclamation program (the *bonifica integrale*) launched by the Fascist government in the mid-1920s, acknowledging some of its results and partly praising his logic. He is influenced by agricultural economist Manlio Rossi Doria (1905-1988).

Second, at the New Deal and comprehensive development in the 1930s, epitomized by the TVA in Southern States, and the Columbia River Basin Project in the North West (*i.e.* Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming): power, irrigation, flood control, water supply, and "Rooseveltian" conservation of resources. This is indeed a global model in the postwar years, replicated in many countries¹³.

Third, at Israel's agricultural cooperative communities in the late 1940s, a topic he discusses with Samuel N. Eisenstadt (1923-2010), who in later years famously developed the idea of «multiple modernities»¹⁴, thus questioning the idea that there is only one path (the industrial one, the Western one) to modernity and development.

To these and many other ideas and influences taken from different international experiences, Sebregondi adds a peculiar attention to the needs of the people, in particular those at the bottom, which is typically his.

Therefore, his views on agriculture and rural society can be summarized as follows.

First, rural societies are a reservoir of social cohesion and of com-

¹¹ L. DE ROSA, *Lo sviluppo economico italiano dal dopoguerra a oggi*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1997.

¹² G. CARLI, *Cinquant'anni di vita italiana*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1993.

¹³ K.K. PATEL, *The New Deal. A Global History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016.

¹⁴ S.N. EISENSTADT, *Comparative Civilization and Multiple Modernities*, Brill, Leiden 2003.

munity values. «Income is not made of bread only», as Sebregondi puts it, and cohesion and values are crucial *in* the process of economic and social development (as means), but also *for* economic and social development (as ends).

Second, rural societies are not closed societies. International cooperation and the transnational circulation of ideas and experts are a crucial factor. Going beyond national borders, Sebregondi advocates a prophetic Euro-African-Arab development plan. It implied the setting up of common institutions, including a Euro-African-Arab development bank – as is being suggested again today in some quarters.

Third, «development is the development of the capabilities of the people, as he writes, and peasants should participate in the process *as peasants*». The mainspring of development on both the economic and social side, is not technology or management in the first place, but finding and encouraging people *at the grassroots*. People who will themselves find the things, old and new, to do: there are always such individuals, in every hamlet, in every village. On this latter point, though not only here, he is clearly inspired by the ideas of his dearest friend, philosopher Felice Balbo (1913-1964), for whom development is *human development*, *i.e.* the process of being more (*plus esse*), rather than that of consuming more or having more¹⁵.

5. Conclusions

Sebregondi is among the pioneers of a humanistic approach to development economics. His ideas have been quoted as a reference source by Denis Goulet (1931-2006), a French forerunner of Amartya Sen in the field of development and development ethics¹⁶.

Sebregondi's views revolves around the philosophical idea of *integration*: integration between different subject matter (economics, history, law, philosophy, political science, sociology, statistics, urban planning); integration between different regions of the world (Africa, Europe, the Middle East, up to the point of advocating a Euro-African-Arab development plan); integration between different productive sec-

¹⁵ F. BALBO, *Idee per una filosofia dello sviluppo umano*, in ID., *Opere 1945-1964*, Boringhieri, Torino 1966, pp. 359-530.

¹⁶ D. GOULET, *Development Ethics at Work: Explorations, 1960-2002*, Routledge, London 2002.

tors. Integration between different views for the common good. His is thus an *integral* view of development.

In his view, rural societies should evolve, but not die: the dialogue between agricultural society and industrial society is key. Horizons should merge each other, rather than eclipse each other. If and when development cast shadows over a vital horizon, then it is not true development. Agriculture plays an *integral* role, not just an economic one, in the development of the people.

In the 1950s Sebregondi's approach to development influenced father Lebrez, who explicitly acknowledged it¹⁷. And Lebrez influenced pope Paul VI, who quotes Lebrez in his encyclical on the development of the people¹⁸. Today, one can hear this note on the *humanising* role of agriculture in the words of pope Francis on land and rural communities: «Land and water grabbing, deforestation, unsuitable pesticides are some of the evils which uproot people from their native land. This wretched separation is not only physical but existential and spiritual as well because there is a relationship with the land, such that rural communities and their special way of life are being put at flagrant risk of decline and even of extinction»¹⁹.

To conclude, Sebregondi's exhortations on the importance of *integration* can still be valuable in times marked by indifference and forgetfulness about the economic and social value of agriculture and rural societies. Interestingly, *agricultural* is among the top ten adjectives in the World Bank Reports up to 1988, dropping to the 75th place after 1996, though *rural* has partly replaced it²⁰.

Sebregondi's integral view of agriculture and development looks as fertile today as it did in the 1950s.

GIOVANNI FARESE

European University of Rome

¹⁷ L.-J. LEBRET, *Suicidio o sopravvivenza dell'Occidente*, Cinque Lune, Roma 1963.

¹⁸ G.B. MONTINI (Paolo VI), *Populorum Progressio*, Città del Vaticano 1967.

¹⁹ J.M. BERGOGLIO (Francesco), *Address of Pope Francis to the Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements*, 28 October 2014.

²⁰ F. MORETTI, D. PESTRE, *Bankspeak: The Language of World Bank Reports, 1946-2012*, Stanford, Literary Lab, 9, March 2015.