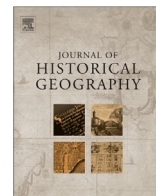




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The making of Italian agricultural landscapes: Emilio Sereni, between geography, history and Marxism



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Abstract

The eclectic twentieth-century Italian intellectual and militant Emilio Sereni (1907–1977) is well known for his works dealing with the history of the Italian agricultural landscape, which enjoyed widespread editorial success and were translated into English and French. Yet his intellectual influences, as well as his scientific personality, have generated little academic interest. This is partly the effect of the relative academic marginality of Sereni, who was an example of an intellectual who alternated political work and 'pure' research outside the university. Using the primary sources held in the extraordinary archives Sereni left behind, and which have only recently been opened to researchers, this paper addresses his connection to geography, a discipline that played a pivotal and little-known role in his interdisciplinary work. It also shows the importance of the international transfer and circulation of knowledge to that work. At the same time, by retracing Sereni's references, the paper analyses the complex and controversial relationship between science and political commitment which characterised both his career and his intellectual generation.

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Keywords: Emilio Sereni; Agricultural landscapes; Italian geography; French geography; Circulation of knowledge

This paper considers the historian of the Italian agricultural landscape Emilio Sereni (1907–1977), a famous figure who has yet to draw the scholarly attention he and his work merit. It is based on a systematic exploration of Sereni's extraordinary archives, held partly in the *Istituto Cervi* in Gattatico (Reggio Emilia), which conserves his books and working materials, and partly in Rome's *Istituto Gramsci*, which has his correspondence. Sereni's most celebrated work, *Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano* (History of the Italian Agricultural Landscape), poses two problems. First, there is a need to understand his relationship with geography, since while it is clear that he used key concepts from human geography, his explicit references to geographers were rare.¹ The literature stresses much more his link with the works of the French historian Marc Bloch (1886–1944), together with Lucien Febvre (1878–1957), one of the founders of the historical school of the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* and protagonist of what

Peter Burke called the 'French historical revolution.'² Bloch was well-known for his seminal work on French agricultural landscapes, *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (Original Characters of French Agricultural History), and was also influenced by Clifford Darby's historical geography. The first reactions to Sereni's work, which used Bloch's *Caractères*, emphasised his debt to the French historian, defining Sereni as the 'Marc Bloch of Italy.'³

Recognizing the importance of Bloch's influence, Sereni claimed some originality in relation to it. Firstly, he stressed the lack of concern in French and German research with some specific characteristics of Mediterranean and Italian landscapes, drawing attention to the role of relief and the co-presence of 'horizontal and vertical structures.'⁴ Secondly, Sereni dealt with some specific types of enclosed fields like Liguria's *marrelo* (see below), 'actually neglected by French scholars.'⁵ Overall, Sereni's main critique of Bloch focused on his tendency to 'hypostatize' landscape, whereas

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¹ E. Sereni, *History of the Italian Agricultural Landscape*, trans. R. Litchfield, Princeton, 1997. Originally published as *Storia del Paesaggio Agrario Italiano*, Rome/Bari, 1961.

² P. Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–89*, Cambridge, 1990.

³ R. Zangheri and Emilio Sereni, *Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano*, Bari, 1961, *Studi Storici* 3 (1962), 169; G. Duby, Sur l'histoire agraire de l'Italie, *Annales ESC* 18 (1963), 357; Rome – Istituto Gramsci, Fondo Emilio Sereni, Scientific Correspondence of Emilio Sereni, H. Desplanques to E. Sereni, Lille, 28 November 1967.

⁴ Sereni, *Storia del Paesaggio Agrario Italiano* (note 1), 13.

⁵ Sereni, *Storia del Paesaggio Agrario Italiano* (note 1), 14.

the Italian scholar considered landscape ‘more a practice, or a process in making, than a fact.’⁶

The second problem his research poses is its relationship to the orthodox Marxism he professed in his political life. Sereni was not an academic, but a political activist.⁷ A prisoner and then an exile under the Fascist dictatorship, he later became a minister and a deputy for the Communist Party, and dedicated most of his time and his writings not to the study of landscape or geography, but to an extensive output of political propaganda. As I shall show, these political activities played a role in inspiring Sereni’s geo-historical work through a concern with agrarian reform, but they also raised questions for him about the explanatory power of orthodox Marxism.

Drawing on recent studies of the interdisciplinary relationship between history and geography, and on the dialectics between scholarship and political commitment, I have examined the Sereni archives as well as his published works to examine his dialogue with French (and a more broadly international) human geography. For this task, the main challenge is that Sereni’s *History of the Italian Agricultural Landscape*, the most important Italian elaboration of the idea of landscape as the result of history and social relations, does not contain a critical apparatus of notes and bibliography due to an editorial decision to target a broad public.⁸ These connections and influences needed to be reconstructed from Sereni’s archive.

The paper therefore embraces Marie-Vic Ozouf-Marignier and Nicolas Verdier’s concept of ‘croisements et fertilisations’ (cross-breeds and fertilisations) between geography and history, which involves discussion of an English-language literature on the same topic inaugurated by Clifford Darby (1909–1992), an author who was well known to Sereni.⁹ Darby, it should be noted, was inspired by the French historian Jules Michelet, who was intellectually attuned to geography.¹⁰ The same debate has also been recently revived by what Robert Mayhew calls an intense ‘border traffic’ between the fields of historical geography and intellectual history, namely the flourishing of works that straddle these disciplines, in the broader context of the relationships between geography and other social sciences.¹¹

Examining these issues in relation to a political figure such as Sereni can also contribute to recent debates on geography, power and the state, focusing on the conditions and possibilities for developing critical and radical geographies, including ‘anarchist geographies’ or ‘critical geopolitics.’¹² A rich literature stresses the values of academic tolerance, academic freedom and intellectual

diversity in universities, considering the production of geographical knowledge, as stated by scholars like Noel Castree, as ‘politics by other means.’¹³ Dealing with a non-academic political intellectual like Sereni, I stress the value of scientific independence and of finding resources and alternative paths to do critical scientific work outside academia for authors rejected or marginalized by the academy.¹⁴

The first part of my paper locates and introduces the figure of Sereni as an original and atypical *engagé* intellectual. The second part analyses, through his published writings and archives, the geographical influences on his work and the importance of the international circulation of knowledge. This discussion focuses on the influence of the French geographer Roger Dion (1896–1981) and the importance, less evident but existing, of Clifford Darby.¹⁵ The third part deals with the importance of the interdisciplinary for Sereni’s political aims, problematizing his supposed ‘Marxist orthodoxy’ and focusing on his collaboration with the ‘prickly’ geographer Lucio Gambi (1920–2006) and his project to re-invent Italian geography on a new basis.¹⁶

Emilio Sereni: a nonacademic intellectual

If we assume the importance of both situating knowledge and of the circulation of ideas in the history of science, it is then necessary to locate authors not only in their place in the world, but also in the social and material contexts in which they worked.¹⁷ In this vein, I would argue that Sereni is an example of an intellectual recognised in the ‘scientific field’ but working outside the academy for several, mainly political, reasons.¹⁸ This led him to write for a broader audience than the specialists, thus infusing his books with an educational-propagandistic character.

Such a position has a significant precedent in the history of geography between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even if the example is very different politically. That is Élisée Reclus and the circle of anarchist geographers, who, being exiled and politically persecuted (as Sereni was for a while as well), promoted their research and thought more through popular publishers and scientific societies than through the usual university activities.¹⁹ Within this strategy for the circulation of knowledge, publishing is central not only to the material survival of the intellectual in question (although Sereni also had the support of the Communist Party for which he was appointed minister in 1946), but also to the character of the knowledge produced and the tasks to which it is

⁶ Sereni, *Storia del Paesaggio Agrario Italiano* (note 1), 16–18.

⁷ G. Vecchio, Emilio Sereni, comunista: note per una biografia, in: E. Sereni (Ed), *Lettere, 1945–1956*, Soveria Mannelli, 2011, 335–370.

⁸ Rome – Istituto Gramsci, Fondo Emilio Sereni, Scientific Correspondence of Emilio Sereni (note 3), Emilio Sereni to Lucio Gambi, 17 December 1957.

⁹ M.V. Ozouf-Marignier, Géographie et histoire, in: A. Bailly, R. Ferras, D. Pumain (Eds), *Encyclopédie de Géographie*, Paris, 1992, 93–107; M.V. Ozouf-Marignier and N. Verdier, L’événement: un objet historique à emprunter, *L’Espace Géographique* 3 (2000) 218–223; M.V. Ozouf-Marignier and N. Verdier, *Histoire et géographie: temps et espace. Croisements et fertilisations* Séminaire EHESS, <http://www.ehess.fr/fr/enseignement/enseignements/2013/ue/872/>.

¹⁰ H.C. Darby, On the Relations of Geography and History, *Transactions and Papers (Institute of British Geographers)* 19 (1953) 1.

¹¹ R.J. Mayhew, Border traffic: recent exchanges between historical geography and intellectual history, *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012) 340–343; R.C. Powell, History and philosophy of geography II: the future history of the geographical propaedeutic?, *Progress in Human Geography*, published online 27 May 2014, DOI: [10.1177/0309132514534790](https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132514534790).

¹² S. Springer, A. Ince, J. Pickerill, G. Brown and A. Barker, Reanimating anarchist geographies: a new burst of colour, *Antipode* 44 (2012) 1591–1604; J. Agnew, The origins of critical geopolitics, in: K. Dodds, M. Kuus, J. Sharp (Eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics*, London, 2013, 19–32.

¹³ G. Kearns, The political pivot of geography, *The Geographical Journal* 4 (2004) 345; R. Orzeck, Academic freedom, intellectual diversity, and the place of politics in geography, *Antipode* 44 (2012) 1449–1469; N. Castree, Geographical knowledges, universities, and academic freedom, *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006) 1109.

¹⁴ M. Quaini, Nato a Roma da una famiglia di universitari: testi e contesti di un profilo scientificamente indisciplinato e di una mancata carriera accademica, in: M. Quaini (Ed), *Paesaggi Agrari: l’irrinunciabile Eredità di Emilio Sereni*, Milan, 2011, 10–32.

¹⁵ H. Prince, Obituary: FL C. Darby, *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (1992) 456–460.

¹⁶ C. Santini, Lucio Gambi et le concept de paysage, Démarche méthodologique et critique d’un géographe dérangeant, *Projets de paysage, revue scientifique sur la conception et l’aménagement de l’espace* 1 (2008) http://www.projetsdepaysage.fr/fr/lucio_gambi_et_le_concept_de_paysage_.

¹⁷ D. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place*, Chicago, 2003.

¹⁸ P. Bourdieu, La spécificité du champ scientifique et les conditions sociales du progrès de la raison, *Sociologie et Sociétés* 7 (1975) 92–93.

¹⁹ F. Ferretti, *Élisée Reclus: pour une Géographie Nouvelle*, Paris, 2014; F. Ferretti, The correspondence between Élisée Reclus and Pëtr Kropotkin as a source for the history of geography, *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011) 216–222.

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