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***Nobility and Agricultural Innovation.***  
***Agri-business, management and investments in Northern Italy (1815-1861)***

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, scholars have underlined how, for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the endurance, or the survival, of the nobility’s social and economic power was still based on large-scale land ownership, which usually represented the majority of the nobility’s assets and in many cases was extended or reinforced (e.g. thanks to public sales of former common properties or of expropriated Catholic Church estates). Nevertheless, the contribution of nobility to the improvement of land and production has been undervalued, as élites mostly tried to maintain the old agrarian structure exploiting peasant work and conserving their social power as long as possible.

By contrast, according to our research results, it seems that until Unification, in the northern area, a large proportion of capital, investments and improvements in the agricultural sector and agro-food production (as well as, increasingly, in railways and infrastructures, industrial and financial sectors) – came from noblemen. Many of them aimed to expand Italy’s trade, fostering the economic progress and applying scientific and technical innovations to agriculture. Some played a natural leading economic role, as they were the richest, heirs to large properties and estates and to complex administration systems originating from early modern times and updated to meet the new managerial necessities. Finally, they all belonged to wide, national and international social (and political) networks which could be useful for their business and which still deserve an in-depth attention and a broader investigation. The main objective of the paper is to reassess the contribution of nobility in 19<sup>th</sup> century Northern Italy economic transformation (particularly, but not only, in Lombardy), focusing on their investments in land and innovation and their involvement in agri-business. The aim is to propose new evidence that noblemen followed an entrepreneurial behaviour, supported the progress of science and techniques and influenced the foundation of new enterprises and economic institutions.

Through an ongoing wide and long research on primary sources as fiscal sources, notarial deeds and family archives (part of a research project led by Silvia Conca Messina and jointly funded by Cariplo Foundation and Lombardy Region), the paper addresses the question whether nobility involvement in the agri-business was only a mean to achieve rents with the less effort, maintaining their social status, or was instead– as we affirm - the result of an entrepreneurial behaviour laying on a sort of class-expertise. The essay first focuses on the management of properties and large estates, where noblemen acted as a sort of ‘chief manager’, governing a complex structured enterprise. Then the paper concentrates on the role and type of investments aiming at the improvement of land and cultivation, livestock and production. Moreover, the contribution enlightens how and why landlords introduced agriculture innovations and experimentation (silk, wine, especially), according to the transformation of the local and international demand and markets.