

## THINKING THEORETICALLY AND COMPARATIVELY ABOUT HISTORY

Filippo Sabetti

McGill University

James Fentress, **Rebels and Mafiosi: Death in a Sicilian Landscape**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000, pp. 297.

Lucy Riall, **Sicily and the Unification of Italy: Liberal Policy and Local Power, 1859-1866**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, pp. 252.

The history of Sicily is no by means unique, but it constitutes a rich laboratory for thinking theoretically and comparatively about politics and a general puzzle in the social sciences: how individuals relate to one another so as to realize their productive potentials in an interdependent situation which characterizes public affairs. This is, after all, why some of us became interested in Sicilian development. If we cannot, for a variety of reasons, do our own archival research, we can turn to the work of historians who provide us with a data base as far back as the ancient world. To be sure, most historians do not use the theoretical distinctions or language of social science but in their own fashion they address critical issues in several topics dear to comparativists: the architecture of choice (Jones 2001) and constitutional political economy more generally (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; V. Ostrom [1982] 1999); collective-action dilemmas in self-governance (E. Ostrom 1990); law and the political basis of economic development (Berman 1983); dynamics of contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly 2001); positive and dark sides of social capital (Coleman 1990; Levi 1996; and Putnam 1993); conditions under which citizens

give, refuse, and withdraw their consent to government (Levi 1997); what makes government (ineffective (Tendler 1997), and what leads people to work outside the law (De Soto 1989); and, of course, the political economy of crimes and punishments (Gambetta 1993; Varese 2001). In short, problematics and issues in Sicilian history lie, in the words of Mark Lichbach and Alan Zuckerman, within the "ambitious scope of inquiry" of comparative politics. For, "no political phenomenon is foreign to it; no level of analysis is irrelevant, and no time period beyond its reach" (Lichbach and Zuckerman 1997, 4).

The works of James Fentress and Lucy Riall are cases in point. The historical knowledge they each advance can be viewed in a complementary fashion. Both offer much data to social scientists eager to uncover what architecture of choice and logic of institutional change, if any, may be at work in contentious political experiments and to understand success and failure in the political economy of decisions and institutions. The architecture of choice and institutional changes discussed in the two works are, in turn, embedded in preceding rounds, and a central issue remains: how far back do we need to go in order to trace the origins of 19<sup>th</sup> century issues and problems? A satisfactory answer depends on all sorts of factors, some of them strictly disciplinary in nature. But a brief look at what we now know about earlier changes (or lack of them) helps to understand the historical context of what preoccupies Riall and Fentress and why Sicilian history remains a laboratory for rewarding social science explorations.

Economic historians like Stephan Epstein (1992) have shown what many social scientists are still reluctant to acknowledge: that feudalism and capitalism (and markets) coexisted with varying degrees of success in Sicilian development before the eighteenth

century. Despite the use of seemingly 'archaic' tools (oxen and scratch ploughs), both yield ratios and production for hectare in Sicily up to the eighteenth century was equivalent to, or higher than, that in most advanced northern European countries (England, Flanders, the Netherlands), and substantially better than in northern Italy or the Baltic regions. In other words, the North European model of agricultural work is not in itself an indicator of progress: had it actually been adopted in Sicily, it would have caused an economic disaster. This conclusion leads Epstein to warn us not to project failings in Sicilian agriculture during the eighteenth-century onto previous centuries.

From the eighteenth century, we can derive other lessons. By the 1770s, a concern for the failings of the Sicilian political economy and the consequences that these were having on Sicilian life was widespread among members of the Sicilian baronial and intellectual classes (often the same persons). So when the new Neapolitan viceroy, Domenico Caracciolo, fresh from his long sojourn in France, went to Sicily in 1781, he could not have found a more favorable climate for reforms. Yet it was not before long that he alienated even the very same people he thought needed to be delivered from bondage. How was that possible, given the widespread support for institutional changes? The answer is familiar to those who study what Tocqueville in his book on the ancien regime in France called "the literary view of politics."

As soon as Caracciolo reached Sicily, he confounded in indiscriminate hatred all things Sicilian — both the worst and what was best in Sicilian political tradition. As a result, he missed the opportunities for reform, transforming baronial opposition to some reforms into a defense of the Sicilian nation. The barons, having acquired a new awareness of their constitutional rights, proceeded in 1812 to press ahead with their own

reform: the abolition of feudalism sweeping away baronial jurisdiction and feudal dues and privileges, and the creation of a new parliamentary monarchy - the so-called Anglo-Sicilian constitution. The problem was that the range of factors that impinged on the ability of Sicilian leaders to govern was far greater than that experienced by their British counterparts. By 1814, the constitutional barons could neither make use of parliament nor manage public affairs without it. What they needed was a long time span in order to work out or solve the accumulation of governmental issues and problems generated by the constitutional reform experiment; but time they did not have as a result of the Congress of Vienna. Still, the chief problem for Sicily was not the "Anglo-Sicilian" constitution of 1812 but rather its suppression and the extension of absolutist rule in 1816 - the starting point in both Fentress and Riall.

From the vantage point of preceding Sicilian history and from a concern for self-governance, the creation of a legal-rational order *à la* Weber in 1816 represents a breakdown and *not* the beginning of modernization in Sicily. This is so, not because the legal-rational order *à la* Weber was imposed from the outside (*a fuorviante* or misleading issue), but because rather than facilitating individual and collective efforts on behalf of common interests shared by islanders, centralized government and administration created an antithesis of interests between rulers and ruled, and between landowners and landless. The antithesis evolved into successive revolts, culminating in the very collapse of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies and the creation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1860-61. But the iron law of oligarchy inherent in the forced creation of unity through centralized government and administration remained, just as the proprietary claims of great

landowners continued to be determinants of the human condition in most of the countryside.

The creators of Italian unification deliberately did not set out to victimize people. Fentress and Riall found Italian leaders assumed or took for granted that the reconstitution of agricultural and communal activities as a function of their state making - what in other contexts James C. Scott (1998) has more recently characterized as "seeing and thinking like a State" - would have primarily beneficial effects. Why, then, the gap between expectations and results?

The two authors find it useful to go back to the problem of governability under the post-1816 Bourbons. They both emphasize the challenges that centralized government and administration faced before and after 1860 with respect to public order and local-central government relations. Their narrative can be taken to suggest, correctly, that many of the difficulties in government performance can be attributed to institutional problems, including the issues how to create an administrative class in a short-time span and, at the same time, secure coordination and compliance through bureaucratic means from an unwilling population. Riall is a careful historian, and she writes insightfully. We must be grateful that she has given so much of her skills and time to the study of Sicily. On three points, however, I find Fentress's analysis more persuasive.

First, I find untenable Riall's belief that a unification *a la* Gramsci could have taken place if Cavour had somehow stopped being Cavour and instead acted like a French Revolutionist; such if/then propositions ignore the actual people and facts. Here is where historians can learn from social scientists concerned with how it is possible for (liberal) governments to secure compliance for their decisions without the consent of the

governed/ruled. Second, what might more realistically have occurred and, if it had, would have given Cavour and his government greater support, legitimacy, and consensus would be their having acted on the political decentralization experiment suggested, among others by Ferrara in his now famous 1860 memorandum to Cavour (not mentioned by either Fentress or Riall), and, at the same time, ceased the confiscation of church property in Sicily, where a majority of people were strongly attached to the church (discussed by Fentress). These possibilities are based on what we know about the people and facts, but the rush of events militated against them. Third, if Riall had looked more closely at the identification and aspirations of Sicilian democrats from the 1840s to the revolt of 1866, she would have found what Fentress presents: that most Sicilian democrats were not Jacobins, or "Gramscian" *ante litteram*. Most, if not all, were political and not social democrats. They wanted self-government, with independence or autonomy for Sicily based on a revised version of the 1812 constitution. Many of them also wanted to resurrect the symbols of the Sicilian nation, including its flag, coat of arms and parliament, suppressed in 1816. (The issue of the Sicilian language, a written language since the twelfth century, with its own dictionary since the sixteenth is more complicated. Suffice it to say that Sicilian-Italian dictionaries continued to be published after 1866 and to this very day. In March 2002, the Feltrinelli, Dante and Flaccovio bookstores in downtown Palermo each offered one book-shelf of reprinted and new dictionaries. The last volume of a projected five-volume comprehensive dictionary started in the 1970s is scheduled to appear by 2004.) Most Sicilian democrats anticipated that a free labor market together with Communal government and parliament recast on the principles of self-government would seriously diminish the ability of large landowners to determine

living conditions for those in the countryside. But, the very reiteration of centralized government and administration in 1860 prevented that to happen. There is much force in Raymond Grew's well known conclusion that the rush of unexpected success spoiled the Risorgimento.

Thus, most Sicilian peasants - and especially those living in the interior where large estates predominated - found themselves locked in a many-person analogue to the prisoner's dilemma of modern game theory. Sidney Sonnino (1876) referred to this as "the iron circle." On the one hand, labor contracts were imposed on workers by a monopoly of large landowners or their agents and supported by the arms of the state; on the other, the same villagers bore the cost of government, without having any voice in its decisions and while deriving little benefit from its actions. Most Sicilians were thus left without legal remedies while the central government would not tolerate any kind of illegal remedy. A logic of mutually destructive relationships came to dominate work and community life. How did people cope with, or extricate themselves from, this situation?

Sicilians sought in several ways to restructure a game of life rigged against them. Riall ends her narrative with the revolt against the central government in 1866. Fentress suggests why Sicily and Piedmont cannot be quite compared in the way that Riall does, for they "were two mismatched pieces of a political puzzle. When Piedmont tried to force Sicily into a political and institutional straightjacket, the influential and authoritative citizens of Palermo, seeing that their power and local autonomy was under threat, renewed their alliance with segments of the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary parties; as well as with the dangerous classes that both sides of the combat had tried to recruit." (p. 254).

Fentress continues the narrative beyond 1866. His archival research on the Sicilian interior and coastal towns uncovers new and fresh evidence about the origins of the mafia. The story of what happened is far more interesting, more unexpected, than any sociological and anthropological theorizing of the 1960s and 1970s led us to believe.

Fentress argues - convincingly, in my view - that the story of the mafia must be understood against the background of the uprisings of 1820, 1848, 1860 and 1866 and, more generally, Sicily's struggle for freedom in the first half of the nineteenth century. In fact, many of the social and political modes of behavior that have evolved, and often become ways of life, in Sicily must be understood as responses to strictly political phenomena. Fentress places in sharp relief the political basis of agrarian problems and the different types of property rights and economies that could be found in coastal plains and in the interior. His study stresses the importance of these differences - climatic, geographic, agricultural, and institutional, including property rights - for a proper understanding of the emergence of the mafia. Variations in the historical and institutional context matter. Just as I found that the mafia of Villalba, in the Sicilian interior, developed out of a civic, self-help tradition (Sabetti 2002), Fentress has found that the mafia of Misilmeri and other coastal towns *without large* estates developed out of a revolutionary tradition. Our respective studies are complementary not contradictory. Fentress's finding will also challenge those who have come to attach a particular leftist (=positive) meaning to revolution and brotherhood.

A chief value of Fentress's work is that it transforms into a variable what is often viewed as a constant: the emergence of mafia groups as illicit, criminal enterprises. Like my own work, Fentress does not challenge the empirical validity of the received wisdom



(espoused by Riall) where it is relevant but rather its generalizability to the entire Western Sicily across time and space since the 1860s. After all, how much do we really know about the history of the more than three hundred villages and towns of Western Sicily? That the mafia was - as Riall suggests - some kind of privatized Leviathan is doubtful, unless of course she is not using the term Leviathan as Hobbes intended.

Conclusions about the origins of the mafia and how mafia groups worked in practice are far from settled, for several complicating reasons. First, given our empiricist epistemology, many social scientists have increasingly adopted a positivist, unproblematic view of the monopoly of state powers and seldom raised the problem, noted by Michael Taylor (1982), of when states have possessed an actual monopoly on the use of force. We have thus neglected to appreciate what Sonnino emphasized and other studies beyond Sicily have found (such as De Soto, Ostrom and Scott) - that is, we have tended to ignore the fact that people, in some basic sense, build their own social and political realities and opportunities and that what officialdom in the formal regime may do is only part of the story. If some concepts or institutions do not work, or work against them, people will make their own adaptations, which may become extreme forms of illegal problem-solving when officialdom continues to think it can govern but people are actually going their own way.

Second, Fentress is quite good in reminding us that the crimes that mafia groups are usually associated with are older than the mafia itself; it is not always easy to distinguish which crimes are the mafia's and which are not. In addition, those who wish to argue that mafia brotherhoods did evil deeds just for the sake of doing evil or violence are on shaky grounds (p.219). Like other analysts (Gambetta; Sabetti; Varese), Fentress

has found that violence is a means, not an end. An outlaw regime can gain legitimacy through the protection services it offers and then exploit the position it has acquired, recreating the problems of political organization that plague the lawful regime. Consider the Mugnai della Posa in the Palermo area (due-paying millers). By 1874, they had managed to transform themselves into a protection racket as a way to enforce their fixed prices and excluding outsiders (p. 165). Does this happen only in Sicily? No need to call up evidence from biblical times. Recall the work of the Family Compact of Upper and Lower Canada in the 1830s. Federterra used similar practices in Tuscany and other parts of North Italy to control the supply of labor and employment during the Biennio Rosso. Fentress makes us appreciate why many unions in the United States have been bastions of organized crime, and why some Sicilian antimafia groups after 1918 and 1945 had difficulties in *not* becoming mirror images of what they sought to destroy.

Third, mafia groups as outlaw regimes enjoyed the support of many, if not most, common people who stood to profit from them and who did not regard state laws as the final determinant of what was criminal or illegal. Short of exiting Sicily, other alternatives available to local people were, if not worse than what was done by the mafia, not always desirable. Fentress lends empirical support to Margaret Levi's analysis of under what conditions citizens give, refuse and withdraw their consent to government, legal and illegal.

Fourth, the conventional wisdom has fostered much misunderstanding about why Sicily's own ruling group seems to have made no attempt to curb the growth of the mafia. Fentress draws attention to two new, and more plausible, explanations. The first is that Sicily's ruling group stood in ambiguous relation to the state; the revolutionaries and

followers of Mazzini, shut out after 1866, allied themselves with the extralegal structure of power, making different mafia groups clients of the revolutionary party. The other reason why Sicily's ruling group made no real attempt to confront local mafia groups is that by the 1890s the old ruling, revolutionary, group had its back to the wall (pp. 250-52). If Fentress is correct, we need to recast much of our knowledge of the workers's leagues of the 1890s and the very history of Corleone.

Fifth, the polemical use of the term mafia in public discourse and the dynamics of contention have often clouded points one, two, three and four. The mafia as *piovra* has a long and rueful history in polemical writings about Sicilian criminality. The world of Sicilian criminals and that of the myths and half-truths that surround their activities overlap, making the task of distinguishing fact from fantasy exceedingly difficult. Against this backdrop, the Caso Notarbartolo as recounted by Fentress becomes persuasive. Still, it is not clear how Fentress could have incorrectly identified Giovanni Giolitti, the prime minister of Liberal Italy, as Antonio Giolitti.

The work of Lucy Riall reminds us that there is more to Sicily's political experience than violence and corruption. The work of James Fentress answers the question that Giovanni Falcone (1991), the Sicilian antimafia magistrate, raised before he was killed in 1992: "Why is it that men, some even endowed with real intellectual abilities, are compelled to devise for themselves a criminal career in order to survive with dignity?" Falcone's concern is not that far off from the central puzzle in the social sciences mentioned at the outset. Both works excel in showing that it is possible to do historical research in terms that transcend the particularities of Sicily, allowing us to think theoretically and comparatively about collective-action dilemmas across time and space.

### References Cited

- Berman, Harold 1983. *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Buchanan, James M. and Gordon Tullock 1962. *The Calculus of Consent*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press
- Coleman, James S. 1990. *The Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- De Soto, Hernando 1989. *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*. New York: Harper & Row
- Epstein, Stephan R. 1992. *An Island for Itself: Economic Development and Social Change in Late Medieval Sicily*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Falcone, Giovanni 1991. *Cose di Cosa Nostra*, in collaborazione con Marcelle Padovani. Milan: Rizzoli
- Gambetta, Diego 1993. *The Sicilian Mafia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Jones, Bryan D. 2001. *Politics and the Architecture of Choice: Bounded Rationality and Governance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Levi, Margaret 1996. "Social and Unsocial Capital." *Politics & Society* 24 (March):45-55  
 ———1997. *Consent, Dissent and Patriotism*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Lichback, Mark I. and Alan S. Zuckerman eds. 1997. *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture and Structure*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly 2001. *Dynamics of Contention*. New York: Cambridge University Press

- Ostrom, Elinor 1990. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Ostrom, Vincent [1982] 1999. "A Forgotten Tradition: The Constitutional Level of Analysis. Pp.151-165. In *Polycentric Governance and Development* ed. Michael D. McGinnis. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press
- Sabetti, Filippo 2002. *Village Politics and the Mafia in Sicily*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Sonnino, Sidney [1876] 1974. *I Contadini di Sicilia*. Florence: Vallecchi Editore
- Taylor, Michael 1982. *Community, Anarchy and Liberty*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982
- Tendler, Judith 1997. *Good Government in the Tropics*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press
- Varese, Federico 2001. *The Russian Mafia: Private Protection in a New Market Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press