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The Mafia and Capitalism. An Emerging Paradigm.



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The Mafia and Capitalism. An Emerging Paradigm

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Abstract

Keywords: peasantry; mafia; antimafia; Sicily; capitalism.

The authors describe their experience as anthropological field researchers in the 1960s and 1970s in a rural town of the interior, and subsequently during the 1980s and 1990s initially on the intersection of political economy and cultural practices in that society, they found their attention drawn to the issue of mafia influence. Subsequently, they became interested in the dynamics of the antimafia process. Over time, the research was influenced by Sicilian scholars and activists led the authors to change their minds about the role of mafia and its historical role in the development of Italian capitalism.

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The Mafia and Capitalism

An Emerging Paradigm

by Jane Schneider *and* Peter Schneider

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We began field research in the interior of Western Sicily in 1970. We had become intrigued by peasant societies – their cultures, politics, and economics as documented by historians and social scientists. A pioneer of peasant anthropology, Eric Wolf, and his colleague Marshall Sahlins, were at the University of Michigan where we pursued PhD degrees in cognitive anthropology (Peter in social psychology, Jane in political science). Sahlins and Wolf were philosophically influenced by Marxism and employed Marxist theory to illuminate the dynamics not only of industrial capitalism and imperialism but also the myriad rural populations drawn into capitalist processes of production. They participated actively, as did we, in the anti-Vietnam War movement at the University campus, a movement that sought to understand why Vietnamese peasants become revolutionary.

In this context we were exposed to the British historian Eric Hobsbawm's classic text, *Primitive Rebels* [Hobsbawm 1959], which introduces the concept of "bandits": persons defined by the state as criminals who, however, are present, and are protected by peasant communities beset by extreme economic oppression. Blurring the line between crime and rebellion, bandits were often villagers who identified with their defiance. Describing them as "prey" of inchoate rage against rapacious landlords and disruptively expanding markets, Hobsbawm included Sicilian bandits and mafiosi among his examples. This analysis prompted us to think of Sicily as a potentially rich terrain for

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