The Mafia and Capitalism. An Emerging Paradigm.

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The authors describe their experience as anthropological field researchers in Sicily - first, during the 1960s and 1970s in a rural town of the interior, and subsequently during the 1980s and 1990s in Palermo. Focusing initially on the intersection of political economy and cultural practices in the social history of a peasant 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 of Sicilian scholars and activists led the authors to change their minds about the organization of the Sicilian mafia and its historical role in the development of Italian capitalism.
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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, and we have remained there ever since. We had become intrigued by peasant societies – their cultures, politics, and economies – 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 1974 (Peter in social psychology, Jane in political science). Sahlins and Wolf were philosophically influenced by Marxism and employed Marxist theory to understand the dynamics not only of industrial capitalism and imperialism but also of rural populations drawn into capitalist processes of production. We participated actively, as did we, in the anti-Vietnam War movement on the University of Michigan campus, a movement that sought to understand why Vietnamese peasants had become revolutionary.

In this context we were exposed to the British historian Eric Hobsbawm’s text, Primitive Rebels (Hobsbawm 1959), which introduces the bandits’ world: persons defined by the state as criminals who, however, are respected and protected by peasant communities beset by extreme poverty. Blurring the line between crime and rebellion, bandits were considered by villagers who identified with their defiance. Describing them as “pre-revolutionaries” by inchoate rage against rapacious landlords and disruptively expanding markets, Hobsbawm included Sicilian bandits and mafiosi among his analysis, which prompted us to think of Sicily as a potentially rich terrain for sociological analysis.

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