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978-0-521-27219-3 - Mafia, Peasants and Great Estates: Society in Traditional Calabria

Pino Arlacchi

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book contains the result of my research on the economic and social structures of the traditional Mezzogiorno, that is, the southern region of Italy, as it was until the 'great transformation' after the Second World War. The decision to begin the research which eventually led to this volume¹ grew out of my dissatisfaction with two views widely held among students of southern-Italian problems, experts on the Mediterranean region and, more generally, by sociologists, economists and anthropologists.

The first consists in the idea that the models of socio-economic organisation of the traditional Mediterranean society of the Mezzogiorno are characterised by a marked uniformity. The second is the belief that there exist two fundamental types of society, 'the traditional' and 'the modern', corresponding to two diverse situations or stages of economic development.

Emphasising uniformities and concentrating on the dichotomy 'traditional/modern' seemed to me to be harmful in an empirical enquiry. It prevented a clear view of one of the most relevant aspects of the Mediterranean world and the Italian south: the synchronic presence in its interior of profound structural differentiation, of qualitative breaks covered by a thin veneer of common culture.

The richness and variety of the comparisons and contrasts to be

¹ The research work lasted from 1974 to 1978 and took place within the ambit of an enquiry into the regional market for labour carried out during the same period at the University of Calabria. The enquiry was coordinated by Giovanni Arrighi and financed through a grant from the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno to the Istituto per lo Sviluppo delle Attività e delle Ricerche Scientifiche in Calabria.

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met in the various different regions and sub-regions of the Mezzogiorno seemed to me from the outset to be too great to be adequately synthesised under one concept such as, for example, 'traditional society on the road to modernisation', or 'systems of rural underdevelopment'. The great estate, the *latifondo* or the small peasant holding, heavy industry and family workshops, kinship and market, 'amoral familism' and the *Gemeinschaft* of the village, modern commercial systems and primitive systems of reciprocity, mafia and statism of the Prussian type, coexisted here side by side or at a few kilometres of distance without apparently disturbing each other.

So it was, when I began the research proper on the 'elementary structures' of the Mezzogiorno, I found myself confronting a problem of definition: what should be the units of analysis? Which of the many Mezzogiornos identified by historians, economists and geographers should I choose as the reference point of my study? The Mezzogiorno of the Ionian coastal region with its great estates or the mercantile Mezzogiorno of the 'Greek' coast? The peasant version of the interior valleys or the 'Roman' northern regions and western Sicily? The list is merely the beginning of the types available.

Gradually, as the work proceeded, it became more and more clear that the whole idea of a 'traditional' Mezzogiorno was no more nor less than a 'geographical expression'. Its internal diversity could not be explained by using the classical instruments of the sociology of modernisation or of the economics of underdevelopment. Any attempt to analyse it as a whole ran the risk of ending up with indeterminate abstractions. The very fact that southern Italy presented itself as an imposing deposit of discordant social structures led me to the decision to reduce the territorial dimensions of the unit of analysis and to concentrate my efforts on one only of the seven administrative regions which make up the Mezzogiorno: Calabria. It had the great advantage that it displayed in a relatively limited geographical area practically all the main socio-economic institutions to be found on a much vaster scale within the south as a whole and in many other areas of the Mediterranean.

In a later and more intensive phase of the research, armed with a more adequate understanding of the methodologies and

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Fig. 1 Map of Calabria showing the three area-types studied: the Cosentino, the Plain of Gioia Tauro and the Crotonese

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techniques of anthropology, I came to the conclusion that I should limit the work to a few restricted sub-regional realities which could be considered representative of wholes much more extensive. After several field investigations in a reasonable number of zones and after studying the data about the socio-economic indicators basic to the various zones under consideration, I selected three 'area-types': the Plain of Gioia Tauro on the Tyrrhenian coast in the southern part of the Province of Reggio Calabria; the Marchesato of Crotona on the Ionian coast in the Province of Catanzaro; and the hilly zone around the city of Cosenza in the northern part of Calabria (see Figure 1).

In the course of the following years while the study gradually took shape, I began to realise that the three area-types I had chosen possessed an internal organisation which was more articulated than I had originally assumed. The relations which united the constituent parts of each of the area-types displayed a recurrence and interdependence which seemed to have a necessary character and which could be explained by something very close to an interior principle of organisation. These were not three structures which could be synthesised in some way as parts of one system or three modes of production whose combination gave rise to vaster social formation; these were three distinct, autonomous and notably complex socio-economic systems. Each of them, besides, tended to exclude and fortify the others. Each seemed to be endowed with its own peculiar phenomenology and its own particular mechanism of equilibrium and change.

The individuation of these systems gave me further confirmation of my initial hypothesis that the customary typology of traditional versus modern society was of little explanatory use. Within the universe of traditional types of society the differences between the different forms of social and economic organisation were so great as to be probably larger than those between a traditional society and a modern one.

The examination of the three area-types eventually took the whole of my time. It led to the further conclusions that (1) each of the area-types selected exemplified, in an amplified and abstract way, one of the elementary forms of underdevelopment in the Italian south manifested in the late 1940s, and that (2) the other

social and territorial units in Calabria might be regarded as the product of the 'combination' of these fundamental types.

The life of these socio-economic systems of the traditional Mezzogiorno did not unfold in a vacuum. Great general forces repeatedly put their structures and capacity for self-regulation into crisis. Among these forces a primary role was played after 1860 by the competition from a newly unified national market. Each of the three types reacted to the menace in its own peculiar way by developing new institutions and new phenomenologies.

The elementary structures of the first of these types of society, the peasant society encountered in a relatively pure form in the area around the city of Cosenza called the 'Cosentino', were so constituted that it could 'do without' the market for the regulation of its economic relations and tended to discourage forms of permanent antagonistic conflict between individuals and groups. Two potent institutions governed the stability and orderly reproduction of the system, allowing it to withdraw from the market, from the state and from internal conflict: the institution of the family-undertaking and the principle of economic and exogamic reciprocity. The traditional Cosentino was distinguished by the dominion of relations of reproduction over those of production and exchange.

In the clash with the forces of the market for goods, with monetisation and with wage labour opened up by the creation of a unified national market after 1861, the Cosentino succeeded in safeguarding its own equilibrium, above all by means of emigration. The great transoceanic exodus of the early years of this century had as an effect not the disintegration but the return to equilibrium of the economic and social bases of the threatened system. Emigration permitted the reconstitution not only of the family-undertaking but also of non-market exchanges on which the principle of reciprocity rested.

By contrast, a profound integration within the market for goods characterised the second type of society identified, the 'society of permanent transition' of the Plain of Gioia Tauro. Its economic bone-structure was constituted by a broad unstable band of medium-sized agricultural and commercial undertakings in perpetual conflict with each other. Relations of exchange apparently dominated those of production or reproduction.

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Given the very high instability of the economic course, subject to unforeseen and unforeseeable fluctuations, the flows of upward and downward social mobility in such a society assumed proportions so massive as to impede the fixing of a stable framework for social classes.

The generalised mobility produced by the chronic instability of market forces was, however, a closed circuit. It was not, that is, inserted in any movement of a more general kind toward the constitution of a new system of social relations. There was no tendency in the short or long run towards *Gesellschaft*. In the Plain of Gioia Tauro no new social roles were created. Society restructured itself from time to time but remained unaltered. It rewound itself about its own central axes. This fluctuation of *corsi e ricorsi*, to use Vico's famous expression, gave rise to a situation which was neither community (*Gemeinschaft*) nor society (*Gesellschaft*). In short, it was a society in permanent transition.

The society of the Plain of Gioia Tauro tended to develop its own original mechanism for reintegrating social cohesion undermined by market forces: the behaviour and power of the mafia-type. The essential characteristic of the mafia was that it was not an organisation or a movement with precise ends and specific programmes but the point of confluence of several conflicting tendencies: the defence of the whole society against the threat to its traditional way of life; the aspirations of the various component groups to 'freeze' the undulating movement of social mobility which ultimately destroyed every institution and all security; personal ambitions and the aspirations of active and ruthless individuals.

Practically all the fundamental structures of the third society I have specified – the system of the *latifondo*, or great estate, with its landless labour force, the *braccianti* – showed an opposite content to that of the peasant society of the Cosentino and a radical dishomogeneity compared with that of the permanent transition of the Plain of Gioia Tauro.

By contrast with the Cosentino, the Crotonese was marked by the presence of great land-holdings and of great economic units in place of the little family farm producing for its own consumption. In the Crotonese in contrast to the tightly knit familial-farming units of the Cosentino, the nuclear family was

disintegrated. It had distinct social classes and a labour market instead of a stratification by generations and of the allocation of the factors of production by means of circuits among family and kinship networks. Furthermore, the Crotonese was marked by a sharp separation of economic from social relations as opposed to the indivisible submergence of the one in the other of the Cosentino. In the Crotonese, relations of production dominated those of exchange and reproduction.

By contrast with the permanent transition of the Plain of Gioia Tauro, the qualitative diversity most relevant was the presence in the Crotonese of a principle of centralised regulation of the economic and social movements. In place of a congeries of social and productive monads in conflict, here we find the work of a precise rationality, whose roots were constituted in the relations of production of the *latifondo*. The Crotonese was characterised at every level by the autocracy of the owner of the *latifondo*. The great landed proprietor had monopolistic powers over men and things. The origins of that power in turn can be found in the particular character of lordship and servitude typical of the latifondist enterprise and the society it created. Such a relationship depended on a disequilibrium artificially maintained in the market for agricultural labour which contributed to the maintenance and consolidation of the essentially class-based structure of the entire system.

The great majority of the population of the *latifondo* was composed of persons forced to sell their labour in the market for money wages. They assumed those features of homogeneity, interchangeability and standardisation which are the typical signs of modern social classes. The reaction to market forces on the part of the landless labourers took the form of periodic explosions of fierce class war until in the end a series of circumstances, tied both to the development of the *latifondo* itself and to the course of the Second World War and Italy's defeat, led to a conflict between *latifondisti* and *braccianti* during the 1940s so intense and prolonged that the entire system was destroyed.

These, then, are the three models of underdevelopment which I examine in the following pages. They are unashamedly abstract, general models based on what I see as the internal organising

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principles of each area-type. I hope, as a sociologist, that they may make a contribution to the refinement of our understanding of the variety and complexity of types of peasant society. I offer them, in addition, for consideration by fellow social scientists interested in the problem of method which the application of theory to reality may pose.

Real people lived their lives in each of the three communities I have studied, and I have never forgotten that the human suffering and struggle which made up the day-to-day existence of many of the peasants studied form part of the larger tragedy of the Mezzogiorno. From Argentina to Canada, from Australia to Scotland, in Germany and Switzerland those peasants, their children and children's children have had to seek an alternative and better way of life than that offered them in the societies of the traditional Mezzogiorno. To those who went away and those who stayed behind, this study is indirectly dedicated.

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The Cosentino

At the beginning of this century, the novelist George Gissing decided, on a whim, to explore Calabria, an area, as he put it, where ‘foreigners are rare; one may count upon new impressions, and the journey over the hills will be delightful’.¹ He landed at Paola, half way down the long western coast of Calabria, and laboriously made his way up the steep coastal mountains which divide the narrow littoral from the interior valleys. It took him three hours, a journey which today on the *superstrada* takes twenty minutes:

At an unexpected turn of the road there spread before me a vast prospect; I looked down upon inland Calabria. It was a valley broad enough to be called a plain, dotted with white villages, and backed by a mass of mountains which now, as in old time, bear the name Great Sila. Through this landscape flowed the river Crati – the ancient Crathis; northward it curved, and eastward, to fall at length into the Ionian Sea, far beyond my vision.²

The locals call the ‘valley broad enough to be called a plain’ the *Conca Cosentina*, ‘cosentine shell’, or, more generally, the Cosentino. This huge valley, rounded by mountains to east and west, and the ‘white villages’ which Gissing saw from the height of the pass make up the subject of this chapter. In particular I have chosen twenty-four villages from the ‘hilly zones’ of the Cosentino, through several of which Gissing would have

¹ George Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea. Notes of a Ramble in Southern Italy* (London, 1901), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

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passed on his way to the capital of the region, the ancient city of Cosenza.³

In 1951 the area covered by the traditional term, *il Cosentino* had 123,000 inhabitants of whom by then about half were living in Cosenza, the metropolis of the region, seat of the government of the province and an ancient episcopal see. It was an unusually densely settled region. Its 221 inhabitants per square kilometre made it one of the most thickly settled in all of Calabria. Only the Plain of Gioia Tauro and the area on the Straits of Messina could equal it.

Traditional Cosentino contained what social scientists call a 'peasant society'. Indeed, as I shall try to demonstrate, the Cosentino had a peasant society of an almost typical kind. Evidence drawn from other parts of the world can be used to illuminate modes of behaviour there and vice versa, as if it had been designed to illustrate the ideal type. Its agriculture was, to begin with, not very specialised and its products tended to be consumed within the community. One of the greatest students of southern-Italian agriculture, Rossi-Doria, classified it in the late 1940s as 'mixed peasant agriculture',⁴ mixed in the sense that it combined types of crops, say grain and olives, potatoes and figs, broad beans and grapes, even some mulberries. Its agriculture grew a bit of everything.

The Cosentino was very different from the other two types of area in this book. If you compare the three areas by type of crop, as in Table 1, you will see that the Cosentino is by far the least specialised of the three, and less even than Calabria as a whole.

The basic economic unit of the Cosentino was the peasant enterprise just as the basic social unit of the village was the

³ The areas I have chosen coincide with three of the 'agrarian zones' defined by the Istituto Centrale di Statistica (ISTAT) in 1929 after a scheme devised by the Istituto Nazionale di Economia Agraria (INEA). Cf. ISTAT, *Annali di statistica*, series VI, vol. V (Rome, 1929); *Annali di statistica*, series VI, vol. XXII (Rome, 1932). The communities included within the 'hilly zone of Cosenza' were Aprigliano, Carolei, Casole Bruzio, Castrolibero, Cellara, Cerisano, Cosenza, Dipignano, Domanico, Figline Vegliaturo, Lappano, Marano Marchesato, Marano Principato, Mendicino, Paterno Calabro, Pedace, Piane Crati, Pietrafitta, Rende, Rovito, San Fili, Serra Pedace, Zumpano (see Figure 1).

⁴ M. Rossi-Doria, 'La Calabria agricola e il suo avvenire', *Il Ponte*, nos. 9–10, 1950, p. 1176.