

RECENSIONI

Antonio SORGE | *Legacies of Violence: History, Society and the State in Sardinia*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2015, pp. 194.

English-speaking anthropologists will be delighted to find that a range of new ethnographic contributions has made Italy particularly «good to think with» (as Claude Lévi-Strauss so memorably put it) in the last few years. From Naples to Turin, from Sicilian villages to the Alps, there are many fresh opportunities to look at the changing contemporary world from European perspectives. As we consider current events, regional comparisons are both a worthy challenge and a problematic temptation. Migrants suffer perilous journeys and ambivalent welcomes, whether they travel through the deserts of the US-Mexico borderlands, or across the waters of the Mediterranean. Global markets and economic crises have affected ordinary people around the world, while the recent dismantling of highly-developed social systems for education has been in as shocking in Milan as it is in Milwaukee, Manchester or Montreal. At least one popular candidate in the 2016 race for the White House might suggest striking similarities to Italy's Silvio Berlusconi. These are extraordinary times for the anthropological imagination, and Italy is clearly a rich resource for projects of comparative analysis.

One such project might begin by engaging *Legacies of Violence*, Antonio Sorge's (2015) very accessible monograph about the evolution of herding traditions and identity practices in central Sardinia. Based on a conscientious review of important historical and social science sources, as well as fourteen months of solid ethnographic experience in 2002-2003, Sorge's scholarship presents a very readable account of the unique «dissident history» (Sorge 2015: 5) of highland central Sardinia. The author contextualizes Sardinian banditry within the intellectual framework of «honour and shame» in the Mediterranean, and he covers the extensive materials from both Sardinian historiography and British social anthropology extremely well. For those who know about Italian criminology primarily through literature about the mafia, the Sardinian context makes for a distinct and provocative case study. It will also be intriguing to those who study «legacies of violence» in very different places, such as urban, «inner-city» spaces where other histories of marginality and understandings of masculinity collide in the social reproduction of ambivalent identities.



Central Sardinia is, of course, a place that continues to garner notoriety in Italian media as a setting for simmering blood feuds and criminality. Sorge examines some related historical and recent events as resources for alternative cultural constructions across different occupational groups and socio-economic categories in Orgosolo, a mountain town located in the interior, nearby the provincial capital, Nuoro. He focuses particularly on male identity as seen through the “traditionalist” interpretation of *balentia*, an ideological construct that he indicates to be challenged by the forces of globalization and social change. Sorge reports that young, underemployed shepherds are often subject to critical reproaches by some women, elders and more educated peers, who fear the reproduction of social distress associated with ongoing violence. Despite a rejection of “postmodern” reflexivity, he shares with readers his own deep sense of discomfort with long hours spent on fieldwork in the taverns, where many local men pass spare time. The dominant style of Sorge’s narrative is one that shoulders ethnographic authority, yet a handful of ethnographic interludes are tinged with a latent sense of danger. The author’s critique of identity constructions based on an ideology of pastoralism is largely consistent with the arguments of Gino Satta in his earlier ethnography, *Turisti a Orgosolo* (2001).

Orgosolo itself is a town that has perhaps had more than its share of anthropologists and other friends; a variety of analytical perspectives can therefore offer rich opportunities for students to explore different interpretations. A town of over 4,000 residents suggests some social complexity, and no ethnography can be holistic; Sorge undertakes an honest account of fieldwork among a limited range of informants, mostly male, in particular social spaces. This is not a work of political economy, and it does not bear extensive witness to either the work or the structural conditions of herding. For this component of analysis, it relies upon Sardinian ethnography from Giulio Angioni and others. This is certainly helpful to English-speaking readers looking for a good synopsis of the literature, and historical perspectives are as much at the heart of this book as contemporary ethnography. The author demonstrates a definite sympathy for British structuralist approaches, and this is reflected in sketches of social opposition between “localist” and “cosmopolitan” orientations among Orgosolo residents, as well as his discussion of hospitality as an instrument of social cohesion and reproduction of symbolic community.

Sorge’s cultural reading will resonate with much of the existing scholarship and public discourses in Italian. There is, however, a risk of misreading the ethnography as a simplistic account of how traditions fall apart as a result of global forces, which are not well nuanced in themselves. The book does not undertake to explore much about the cross-cutting ties across occupational groups and family networks, or the complex role of institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church, government agencies, political groups or other organizations. Only a few voices are directly reported in the text, and given the selections made by the author, a reader might too easily conclude that all the herders in Orgosolo must necessarily be «culturally dislocated» barflies. The author

could go further to explore identity constructions that produce novel, often genuine and creative interpretations of the pastoral activities and traditions associated with central Sardinian towns. But portrayals of individual subjectivity are limited. Instead, the analysis leverages a particular type of critical commentary that comes from within the community, favouring the concerns of older shepherds, as well as those residents who have enjoyed access to greater social mobility. It represents these concerns fairly, and gives them the significance they deserve. In doing so, however, it offers little agency or credit to either “localists/traditionalists” broadly speaking, or anyone involved with either herding or ecotourism activities today. Yet the rootedness of pastoral identities continues to be important in Orgosolo and throughout central Sardinia, in generating sincere ethical and moral discourses that stand against and limit “legacies of violence”, while also challenging the presumed divide between tradition and modernity. This paradox invites further scholarly debate, and perhaps future contributions from the author of this provocative book, which will clearly make an impact on Sardinian ethnography.

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