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Book Forum

Palumbo's strabismus

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Comment on Berardino Palumbo, *Lo strabismo della DEA. Antropologia, accademia e società in Italia*, Palermo, Edizioni Museo Pasqualino, 2018, pp. 289.

Employing a rich array of historical, sociological and ethnographic analysis and methods, Palumbo analyzes the field of anthropology in Italy from its initial decades of expansion to the more recent numerical decline in anthropology positions in the Italian academy and its "condizione di sofferente precarietà esistenziale e cognitivo-intellettuale" (p. 13). With the metaphor of strabismus, Palumbo identifies competing tendencies in Italian anthropology, "un andamento sincopato", between national and international dynamics that shape the field, rendering it simultaneously fixed in fiercely hierarchical power relations within Italy yet also intellectually agile and progressive (p. 14). The work transports the reader to a variety of engaging vignettes and multi-layered analyses: his own biographical memories of his graduate training and career (pp. 19-27), an excellent analysis of Ernesto de Martino's work and enduring influence, and analysis of anthropologists represented in print and television media. He shifts seamlessly between formal and informal modes of analysis. On the one hand, he offers rich quantitative and comparative analysis of anthropology positions and rates of growth and decline illustrating their "organizzazione gerontocratica e clientare" (p. 48). On the other hand, he uncovers the

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evolutionary thinking and "implicit racism" in comparisons between pop artist Jennifer Lopez and Neanderthals, a way of thinking Palumbo believes still informs public perceptions of the field (p. 59).

Palumbo is at his best in his compelling and even courageous analysis of *chefferies* and regional *alleanze* in Italian anthropology over the past two decades. Using a term of anthropological resonance, *chefferies,* Palumbo uncovers how few individuals, and mostly men, have dominated Italian anthropology with their stronghold on economic, political and intellectual capital (pp. 75-76). What's more, Palumbo carefully traces how the *alleanze* undergird not only the hierarchical organization of academic institutions and intellectual influences, but also their tentacular grasp on professional associations (p. 86), scholarly publications (pp. 87-90) and graduate student training (pp. 92-94). Because the *big man (o woman)* of each *chefferies* played a role, directly or indirectly, on appointing committees, graduate students would be placed according to these influences, thus guaranteeing the reproduction of this structure for new generations. Taken together, new and innovative scholarship in Italian anthropology must fight to emerge from "un campo intimamente plasmato da particolarismi, tensioni, [e] conflitti fazionali" (p. 102).

In Chapter 4, Palumbo reviews four anthropological monographs of United States based scholars on Italy: Molé (2012), Jason Pine (2012), Andrea Muehlebach (2012), and Lilith Mahmud (2014). Palumbo is understandably vexed because of the "dominanti antropologie anglofone" and "egemoniche" anthropology of US-based academy (p. 15), as well as the dangerously shrinking pool of anthropologists in Italy over the past decade (pp. 32, 243). Framed as a "chiusura al dialogo" (p. 15) and "reciprocità negate" (p. 179), his central complaint is the accusation that citations of Italian anthropologists number under five (p. 195). Yet counting and labeling citations is only the most obvious way to assess scholarly influence. Other of Palumbo's frustrations over citational practices are less scrutable, even bewildering. He puzzles over why I might include a film about mobbing in a book about mobbing in Italy (p. 202). He huffs over my exclusion of Redini's (2007) study of Romanian workers at Italian owned companies in Romania. And he is aghast when Pine does not cite Signorelli (2002) on 19th century Neapolitan popular culture.

With all due respect for Redini (2007) and Signorelli (2002), what is it that is really driving Palumbo's outrage other than a perceived snub of his co-national anthropologists? It did not matter whether these well-reviewed and award winning monographs amply cited Italian academics in sociology,

history or political science, Italian nationals working in the US or British academy, or even – and this level of Palumbo's minutia is spectacular – Italian anthropologists who *trained* in the US or UK but work in Italy (p. 196). No, the only suitable citation would be Italian anthropologists who both trained and work in Italy. Moreover, Palumbo frames these citational practices as acts of individual choices and neglectful scholarship. Social scientists typically know that all individual choices and, more broadly, the production of knowledge, even in reproducing an asymmetrical relationship with the Italian academy, are subject to forces that are much bigger than individual intentions. Finally, as I have argued in this journal, the anthropology of Europe in the United States has also struggled to overcome an antiquated anthropological privileging of the non-western "other"; so these four ethnographies on Italian citizens (not foreign nationals) were likely subject to increased scrutiny (Liston 2016). The real mystery here is why Palumbo seems blind to the ways in which citational practice is constrained by political economic forces and dominant intellectual trends when he dedicates much of the same book to analyzing how Italian anthropology is shaped by similar underlying pressures and structures (e.g. pp. 32, 243-244).

In her sociological analysis of American academic evaluative processes and notions of academic excellence, Michelle Lamont holds that each discipline an "evaluative and epistemic culture of their own field" (p. 54). In ways that align with Lamont's study, Palumbo frames his own research as an "etnografia di un campo accademico" (p. 29), evenly jokingly imagining how the 153 Italian anthropologists in the Italian academy are kind of "cacciatori raccoglitori" compared with the United States' massive 20,000 person field of anthropology (p. 43). If we understand the field of anthropology as culture and Palumbo's work as "auto-etnografica" (p. 102), then perhaps Palumbo committed the same sin he ascribed to Mahmud: being "incapace di oggettivare quell'humus culturale" (p. 200).

Yet Palumbo's review of these monographs goes well beyond enumerating citational snubs and employs a "gotcha" style, which is an American term for journalistic reporting that employs a technique of distraction. Palumbo adopts this "gotcha" style of review for four American monographs on Italian life: Molé legal analysis has translation error!, Muehlebach omitted two legal cases in Lombardia!, Pine ignored Neapolitan folklorists!, and Native Italian Mahmud can't analyze her own culture (pp. 197-204)! Palumbo's "gotchas" aim to entice his largely Italian audience by forefronting salaciousness and trying to overtly shame these American

ethnographers who, in his estimation, enjoy a structurally dominant position with respect to Italy. His tone and prose are absolutely antithetical to the kind of generous critique we might expect from a scholar of Palumbo's stature.

But let us probe deeper: Palumbo takes on four first-time book authors, published before these scholars were tenured, ¾ of whom are women, whose names he does not deign to consistently spell correctly (e.g. "Mohlebach" p. 202). That Palumbo can embody the *big man* of Italian anthropology rides on the systemic privileging and position of male scholarship in the Italian academy. Palumbo's own analysis provides further evidence that anthropological discourse in Italy has been and remains deeply gendered, "una piramidale gerontocrazia maschile" (pp. 47, 98). Indeed Palumbo shows us how Italian women hover at around the same small number (30-32%) of professori Ordinari, have disproportionately decreased their share as professor Associati and have increased their proportion of the lowest rank, as Ricercatori universitari (p. 47). Though aware the Italian academy may be "tenacemente ancorati a concezioni autocratiche del potere, produttori che naturalizzano gerarchie", he fails to critique how his own gendered subjectivity plays into the power structure he reveals (p. 14). A late career scholar, Palumbo reproduces the very "chieftaincy" he aims to undo (p. 80).

I share Palumbo's hope for a "democratizzazionne degli spazi della produzione scientifica in antropologia" where global scholarly exchange might be more equitable and reciprocal. In his vision for the future, Palumbo also shares his dream of requiring more native anthropology: "una quota minima annua di libri scritti da studiosi provenienti da paesi dove sono i terreni da loro vissuti" (p. 192). I am, however, deeply troubled by his view of auto-ethnographic work as intrinsically superior and authentic. Rather, we must be equally skeptical of native and non-native anthropology, and never assume that any nationalized subjectivity automatically endows one with greater or lesser intellectual acumen. Indeed these kinds of epistemic assumptions represent the central preoccupation of my forthcoming book on Italy where I interrogate how the material and technological forms of knowledge – televised, print media, and Internet shape emergent political structures (Liston n.d.). How does the way we know the world shape who we think should rule it? In order, however, to trace how our epistemological practices give rise to political regimes and high stakes forms of governance, we must, first and foremost, be able to scrutinize the epistemic assumptions of our own work. Clear vision is just as much a function of knowledge as it is the physical structure of the eye.

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