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Carina Gunnarson, Cultural Warfare and Trust. Fighting the Mafia in Palermo. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008, 246 pp.

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Book reviews

Carina Gunnarson, *Cultural Warfare and Trust. Fighting the Mafia in Palermo.* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008, 246 pp.

The aim of the research presented in Carina Gunnarson's book is rather ambitious. Its theoretical premises emphasis the benefits that a substantial endowment of social capital brings to the life of a community. On reviewing a number of studies on the topic, the author states that "the existence of social capital in a society – or, in the context of the study described in this book, more specifically generalised trust – could be decisive not only in the prevention of crime, but also for economic development and an effective democracy. Moreover, the presence of generalised trust in society leads to better government, more redistribution and economic growth and less corruption. The existence of generalised trust in society is connected to positive outcomes such as personal happiness, safer neighborhoods and solutions to various problems of collective actions" [p. 1]. If generalized trust seems to have such a major impact on the characteristics of a society, on the quality of democracy, and even on the individual happiness of the members of a local community, the author wonders whether there exists a way to increase the level of generalized trust among citizens. In particular, at the outset of the book, she asks: "Is it possible to fight persistent values of distrust? Is it possible to support the development of generalised trust between citizens through public action from above, through civic education?" [p. 1].

These questions assume particular importance in regard to the territorial setting in which the research is conducted. For Gunnarson's endeavour to furnish empirically-grounded answers to these questions concerns the city of Palermo. The "battle" to increase generalized trust among lower-secondary school students in certain areas of Palermo is considered essential if the war against the Mafia is to be won. This is therefore primarily a cultural battle waged against the traditional mistrust among Sicilians, deliberately fostered by the Mafia [p. 70], of attempts by the institutions to break this vicious circle and increase generalized trust, especially in the younger generation. The theoretical plot of the book is therefore the contrast between the destiny which, in light of works by authors such as Banfield and Putnam, seems preordained by Palermo's history and the capacity of the institutions to design public policies able to lay the bases for a different future.

To resolve this theoretical dilemma, Gunnarson conducts empirical research which combines two techniques: the two-wave administration of a questionnaire to students attending lower-secondary school; the collection and analysis of letters written by students of the same age. As said, the context is Palermo, in which city, during the 1990s and on the initiative of an anti-Mafia mayor, Leoluca Orlando, a campaign was launched to improve the public schools and in particular to run courses on themes connected with legality. The theoretical reason for choosing Palermo as a case study is that it is a setting least favourable to attempts to increase generalized trust. As the author puts it: "Our point of departure was that Palermo represents a case where change is *least likely* to occur. If change

occurs in this area, despite the hostile environment, we can be fairly optimistic about the possibility of changing people's attitudes elsewhere" [p. 40, emphasis in the original].

The first survey was conducted in the autumn of 2002. A structured questionnaire containing questions drawn partly from other questionnaires used in similar research (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement; Department of Psychology in Palermo; Swedish National Agency for Education) was distributed to 386 students at the beginning of their first year at lower-secondary school. In the first months of 2005 a second questionnaire was distributed to 315 students, 246 of whom had also compiled the first one [p. 48]. All together, the project covered students in 20 classes at different schools located in areas of the city characterized by different socio-economic levels which the author classifies into three categories: low-ranked area; intermediate area; high-ranked area. The average age of the students at the time of the first survey was 10 to 11 years, and 13 to 14 at the time of the second [p. 42]. The questions in the questionnaire addressed, amongst other things, the themes of interpersonal trust and confidence in the institutions, the status and lifestyle of the family, interpretations of concepts such as citizenship, friendship, and traditional Sicilian values [p. 45]. The aim of the two-wave survey was to determine whether or not, over the three years of class projects on legality, the student's level of interpersonal trust and trust in the institutions had increased.

Without going into further details, the methodological shortcomings of the research design are immediately evident. Firstly, as Gunnarson herself admits [p. 50], the study lacks a control group, i.e. a group of students of the same age who were not involved in the class legality projects (on whose characteristics, in truth, scant information is given). Hence comparison can only be made internally to the sample of students who compiled the questionnaire, with rough consideration made of their memberships in the three socio-economic categories based on the geographical location of their schools. Moreover, the structured questionnaire is probably not the instrument best suited to addressing themes which children aged 10 to 14 find difficult to understand. Not by chance, some of them took two hours to complete the questionnaire and struggled to comprehend some questions [p. 52]. Finally, aside from the goodness of the general sampling procedure, to be noted is that, whilst 386 students compiled the first questionnaire, only 246 also compiled the second one. The 140 missing respondents are unlikely to have been any students whatever, considering that school drop-out and absenteeism rates are highest among students from families of low social status. Not coincidentally, as the author writes, "sample drop-out between the two waves (2002 and 2005) was largest for the low-income areas" [p. 48]. And if one also bears in mind that the most unruly students were sent out of class during administration of the questionnaires [p. 52], doubts concerning the accuracy and reliability of the survey increase further.

In spite of the evident methodological shortcomings of the research design and the survey phase – many of which the author acknowledges – what are the results of the research? As said, the key question that the research sought to answer was whether generalized trust increased or decreased among children attending the last three years of compulsory school. In this regard, three years after the first questionnaire, significant improvements were not recorded in the five indexes of trust (trust in known people; trust in the school environment; trust in unknown people; trust in people in general;

Sicilian sayings). Or better, there were small positive or negative changes in the indexes [p. 149], but on close inspection they seemed entirely random. Besides the description of the differences in the levels of declared trust, the author does not provide convincing explanations as to the differences recorded between the first and second survey. Also the "internal" differences found – those among students at schools located in different areas of the city – do not offer particular insights into the relationship among school attendance, participation in the legality projects, the social extraction of students, and increases or decreases in their trust.

In regard to comparison between the levels of generalized trust of the Palermo students and those of students in other Italian cities, there unfortunately seem to be no studies which allow for perfect (or at least quasi-perfect) comparability. Consequently, in order to give some sort of comparative background to her study, Gunnarson relates her data to those collected by a survey coordinated by Loredana Sciolla on a population of adults in six Italian cities. The bizarre comparison made between the opinions of Palermo children aged 10 to 14 and those of adults resident in different areas of the country – the drawbacks of which are acknowledged by the author herself [p. 134] – purportedly shows a higher level of trust among the Palermo students. Despite these weak empirical bases, the author concludes in regard to the school's role in enhancing generalized trust that "these findings suggest that schools and teachers have an important potential to influence students' values" [p. 135]. More specifically, focusing her analysis more closely, the author states that the students' perceptions of "openness of school structures, fairness of institutions, caring school environment and openness of the classroom climate all have positive and statistically significant effects on trust" [p. 152]. Obviously, there is no reason to dispute this statement, but the statistical significance on which it is based only correlates the phenomena, without explaining the direction of the causal relation between them. Not made explicit, therefore, are the analytical mechanisms able to explain the students' perception of these characteristics of the school environment in terms of their modest increase in trust over time.

As said, besides the two-wave administration of the structured questionnaire, the research used another instrument: what the author calls "The Letter Project." This consisted in getting students of four of the twenty classes covered by the survey to write letters on four themes (a normal day in my life, at school and after school; my district and its inhabitants; relations with other people; reflections on important events during recent years). For each theme Gunnarson received between 50 and 60 letters [p. 165]. This impressive corpus of empirical material is used by the author to deepen aspects covered by the questionnaire. Chapter 9, in fact, contains numerous excerpts from the letters on trust in the institutions, trust in others, the climate at school, etc.

Overall, on reading the book, one notices an increasing discrepancy between the theoretical premises (and promises) of the research and its empirical realization. First, the idea that Palermo is the "worst scenario" in which change in terms of trust can come about fails to consider the complex reality of the Italian *Mezzogiorno*. As difficult as life may be in Palermo, and particularly in its popular districts, it is still the capital of Sicily and the second city in Southern Italy. It has been the focus of political attention and public opinion, and its civil society has always been vibrant, especially in recent years. Consequently there are many worse scenarios of weaker state control over the

territory in the South of Italy: for instance, certain zones of the province of Reggio Calabria or the area extending between Naples and Caserta. Moreover, although no-one would deny that Cosa Nostra is still a terrible threat to the society, political system, and economy of Palermo and Sicily, the characteristics of the Mafia are certainly not those described by the author in chapter 4, in which she describes places "where criminals can find a safe haven from law enforcement agencies, where recruitment of labour is possible, where money can be laundered and where people's loyalty gives the Mafioso protection" [p. 62]. More generally, it is difficult to agree with the image of a Mafia which, in these areas, "to a large extent replaces vital government functions, for example the distribution of water and electricity or the provision of security in exchange for Mafia-imposed 'taxes', or *pizzu*" [p. 63], or with the depiction of Mafia bosses as being "free to act as they choose within" the territories that they control [p. 60]. Only by espousing this naive caricature of Sicily and the Mafia can one believe that the increase in generalized trust – as "measured" by questions difficult to understand for some student respondents – can be taken as signalling that the fight against the Mafia is making progress. If anything, as other recent studies have shown, recent years in Palermo have seen very different signals which, on the cultural level as well, indicate a widespread shift to stigmatization of the Mafia. I refer in particular to the anti-racket campaign by the "Comitato Addiopizzo" and the decision of the Association of Sicilian Industrialists (Confindustria) to expel members who pay *pizzu*. These are two positive signals amid the battle, cultural more than economic, which must be won if the Mafia is to be definitively defeated.

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