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# Stationary Bandits. Lessons from the Practice of Research from Sicily

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# Stationary Bandits

## Lessons from the Practice of Research from Sicily

by Filippo Sabetti

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A concern with theories of collective action and inaction and Danilo Dolci's reports on West Sicily originally stimulated my interest in Sicily. My research began with the normative and empirical question of whether the structure of basic social institutions can be the primary instrument for advancing human welfare or an essential source of human adversity. I originally wanted to explore this topic in Haiti but several events compelled to turn to a more hospitable research site – Western Sicily.

My first book on Sicily was published in 1984 under the title *Political Authority in a Sicilian Village*; a second edition retitled *Village Politics and the Mafia in Sicily* updated the earlier book and was published in 2002. I have devoted one third of another book, *The Search for Good Government: Understanding the Paradox of Italian Democracy*, to the war on crime in Sicily as a fight for good government [Sabetti 1984; Sabetti 2000; Sabetti 2002]. I have written several essays and book reviews on the mafia and related topics. For all these reasons, I welcome the opportunity to revisit the history of the mafia in the hope that my reflections on the practice of research will be of some use to others. I offer my experience as an encouragement to young scholars not to be afraid of challenging the prevailing academic and popular wisdom and to persevere in the work they consider of genuinely scholarly importance.

When I began working on the topic in 1970, there was an overwhelmingly dominant paradigm in the approach to the study of Sicily and Southern Italy – an approach that is still predominant in some quarters. The script reads essentially that the making of a united Italy had been a failure because the middle class had failed

in its mission of ushering in a system of centralized government and administration *à la* Max Weber and democratic (i.e. Jacobin or Socialist) reforms. From here, follows Gramsci's description of the South as "a general social disintegration" – variously worded by subsequent analysts. The Gramscian understanding was given additional refinements for Sicily, culminating in the generalization – whose truth was deemed to be self-evident – that the rise and presence of mafia groups were always arrangements worked out mostly by landlords and estate managers to manipulate peasant labour. From such vantage points, it became easier to project back into time the themes of ungovernability, backwardness and violence – viewed together as "the Sicilian problem" – and portray them as almost immemorial and enduring features of Sicilian life. This way the history of the mafia became the history of Sicily itself.

I found grave inadequacy and deficiency in the dominant paradigm about Southern Italy, Sicily, and the mafia. The inadequacy of standard explanations of mafia groups, coupled with a knowledge of the poor performance of governmental arrangements and of the institutional and legal impediments to voluntary undertakings, led me to outlandish conjectures about outlaw societies. Given the costliness of State solutions to the problem of social organization, what alternative social regimes could Sicilians develop that would enable them to cope with the contingencies of life and survive in that struggle?

These alternatives social regimes require their own system of entrepreneurship for preserving enforcement capabilities outside the established law and for maintaining an appeal to constituencies of potential supporters. Such outlaw societies are confronted with the all the problems of political organization, including the possibility that their rule-making and rule-enforcing mechanisms can become mechanisms for tyranny and shakedown rackets. Thus, I reasoned, whether Sicilian outlaw societies were gangs of malefactors, expressions of the fundamental asociality of islanders, outlaw protective agencies of rural or urban capitalists, and, more generally, impediments to human development was a question for empirical study – not for political mythology.

I did not assume or think that "the" mafia as a set of criminal organizations never existed; nor that some extra-legal groups were not criminal *ab origine*. No right-thinking person or analyst can refrain from sharing *l'impegno civile* or civic engagement shown by Dolci and many Sicilian intellectuals, politicians and magistrates in fighting criminals and criminal organizations. The challenge was, and remains, to maintain civic engagement without impairing due process of inquiry. After all, to understand something does not mean to justify it. Many analysts, I discovered, failed to take up this challenge; their civic engagement became highly moralistic, creating a huge antinomy between *impegno civile* and empirical research [see also Sabetti 2006].

What I argued – and set out to show in my own research – that the rise and operation of Sicilian mafia groups should – and can – be more carefully investigated.

I was helped in rethinking, and meeting, the challenge by two sets of factors. First, there was the work of American political scientists Vincent Ostrom and Elinor Ostrom.<sup>1</sup> Their unparalleled interdisciplinary inquiry into the study and practice of the American compound republic, public administration and public services, the foundations of self-governing societies and theories of constitutional choice, opened up for me new theoretical vistas. Their work and example spurred me to add public and rational choice theory to my tool kit in the study of comparative politics. Having taken up the challenge, I soon discovered that public and rational choice theory led me, in turn, to appreciate anew the Nineteenth-century Italian school of public finance, and to discover the intellectually invigorating work on constitutional political economy by several Sicilian thinkers, including the great political economist, Francesco Ferrara (1810-1900).<sup>2</sup> Second, as someone originally trained in both history and political science, I was uneasy in the face of huge generalizations that characterized the dominant approach in social science concerning the cut-and-thrust of history itself, as well as the lack of almost any attention to ongoing contests of ideas and movements as people sought to influence one another. Hence, I set out to confront the historical puzzle of what went wrong in Sicilian development and why some people turned to extra-legal and outlaw arrangements known collectively as the mafia. An initial step led me to refocus the way in which we in social science have assumed as unproblematic centralized government and administration (or the Weberian state), and looked at Sicilian history, and the organization and practice of governmental institutions there. I did so with a tool kit fashioned in the American Midwest and amplified with elements of the Sicilian intellectual tradition [see also *Assemblea regionale siciliana* 2000] – without, however, the Sicilian sensitivity about speaking badly of Sicily.

The reasons for examining the Sicilian problem within the microcosm of a single Sicilian community and for eventually settling on “Camporano”, the pseudonym of Villalba, are made clear in chapter 1 of *Village Politics and the Mafia in Sicily* [Sabetti 2002, especially 13-15]. The depopulated and calm look of Villalba today gives no hint of its contentious two hundred years history. Unlike some of the other towns I had seriously considered for fieldwork, Villalba is notorious for having been at one point a capital of the mafia. *The New York Times* [1954] saw fit to print news of

<sup>1</sup> Following the award of the Nobel Prize in Economic Analysis to Elinor Ostrom in 2009, I discussed at some length their work and the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis as well as their influence on my own research in Sabetti 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Reference to Ferrara can be found in Sabetti 2002, 226-227, 231, 237. I have dealt more specifically with his ideas in Sabetti 1990 and in Sabetti 2000, especially in chapter 2.

the death of the local mafia chief, Calogero Vizzini, widely known as “Don Calò,” in 1954.<sup>3</sup> But “Don Calò” is not the only villager known to the outside world. There are two other villalbesi well known outside the town for having fought the mafia and for having written about Villalba’s contentious events.

They are Luigi Lumia and Michele Pantaleone. Though I could not reveal their identity originally, their points of view were duly taken into account in the narrative; both, in fact, speak out on many subjects, especially in chapters 8 and 9. I met with each of them several times in Villalba and Palermo. I remain especially grateful to the late Michele Pantaleone for his help in finding lodging for me in 1971-72, when I first stayed in the village, and for allowing his most trusted and closest aide to instruct me about the ways of the town and its people for no less than two hours, almost every day for about a year. Still, I could not automatically accept what I heard as truth. One problem was that Lumia and Pantaleone had a history of sharply disagreeing between themselves, to the point of needing judicial authorities to settle their disputes. One such disagreement was finally settled (in Lumia’s favour) as late as 2002. Thus I was compelled to treat their accounts, including interviews and conversations with them, as I treated all other primary evidence – in need of confirmation.<sup>4</sup> When someone volunteers to provide “incontrovertible” evidence about the criminal activities of someone else, but somehow never, over the course of many years, finds time to do so, then his affirmations must be taken, at best, *cum grano salis*. The purpose of my work was, after all, to trace and explain local developments in which Lumia and Pantaleone, and past members of their families, had been central protagonists, acting often as estate managers, rentiers, private guards (*campieri*), and professional people as well as politicians, mafiosi and antimafia fighters. I discuss the procedures for weighing the evidence collected, in chapter 1 and in the Note at the end of the book.

Although the book deals with a single village, the argument, I argue, could apply to other villages in and beyond Sicily – wherever there are communities of people struggling to realize their self-governing capabilities in institutional settings rigged

<sup>3</sup> He died on July 11.

<sup>4</sup> Pantaleone was the local Socialist leader; Lumia belonged to the Communist party. Over time Lumia occupied different positions of leadership in the PCI and was mayor of Villalba in 1978. I generally found Luigi Lumia’s accounts more reliable than Pantaleone’s and this also applies to Lumia’s two-volume history [Lumia 1990]. As a villager, Lumia does have an incomparable grasp of local history, people and papers, and an exceptional access to PCI archives, that no outside researcher can match. But his accounts and interpretations are more political than scholarly, so need sifting. One example should suffice: Lumia is perhaps the only (former) Communist analyst to publicly recognize that the collapse of the regional association of Left cooperatives (USCA) by 1949 was due to corrupt practices internal to USCA itself; but he cannot resist insinuating that somehow such practices may have been due to the mafia [*ibidem*, 484]. There is no evidence of mafia involvement in the internal affairs of the Communist-run USCA in 1949; I report what I found on page 172.

against them. Since the book first appeared, a rich literature has become available both suggesting that what I set out to explore was neither outlandish nor misplaced – showing that we can think more theoretically and comparatively about what I set out to explore. Hence, the results of my research, revolutionary and extremely upsetting for some when the book was first published, can now find greater support and have something to contribute to ongoing inquiries in several fields of study: the political economy of crime and punishment in Sicily and as far away as Russia and Japan; the challenge of modernity as “seeing like a State” or “seeing like citizens”; the dynamics of contentious politics; the conditions under which citizens give, refuse and withdraw their consent to government; and what makes government, itself a form of what Mancur Olson called stationary banditry, ineffective and what leads local people to work outside the law – in effect to set up their own expression of stationary banditry [Gambetta 1993; Varese 1994; 2001; Bandiera 2002; Milhaupt and West 2000; Scott 1998; Ostrom 2001; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Levi 1997; Anechiarico and Jacobs 1996; de Soto 1989; Olson 1993].

In particular, Diego Gambetta drew on my research to build his own approach to the study of the Sicilian mafia. His book on the Sicilian mafia richly deserves the scholarly acclaim it received from, among others, James S. Coleman, Robert D. Putnam, and Peter Reuter. While sharing many similarities, my approach digs deeper than his approach in the historical and political context of the business of private protection in Sicily. Whereas he emphasizes the classic contribution of Leopoldo Franchetti, I suggest that the contribution of both Franchetti and his travelling companion, Sidney Sonnino, must equally be taken into account. Whereas Gambetta accepts as unproblematic the Italian unitary state, I take it to be part of the Sicilian problem. Whereas he dismisses, somewhat sarcastically, Santi Romano’s insights in coming to terms with the plurality of legal and extra-legal institutions, I do not, as my research also draws attention to the work of legal anthropology and especially Antonio Pigliaru’s study *La Vendetta barbaricina come ordinamento giuridico* [1959].<sup>5</sup> At the same time, I must add that, when in my *The Search for Good Government* [2000] I examine the Palermo underworld and the government policies to combat it, my approach and findings much closer to those of both Gambetta and Federico Varese. The dimensions I treat there are:

- a) the ontology of the mafia in question;

<sup>5</sup> Much of the work of Paolo Grossi and his legal studies Center at the University of Florence has been concerned with how we are to understand the plurality of rule-governed arrangements human beings devise in different contexts and over time.

b) the strength of the criminal underworld and the challenge of finding partners in crime;

c) the price of crime and why crime pays;

d) bureaucratic politics, clientelism and institutionalized corruption;

e) police and prosecutorial strategies.

The history of Sicily constitutes a rich laboratory for examining different expressions of political experiments and illegal enterprises. The rise of the mafia cannot be understood if we neglect or skip over its historical context.

### **The Historical Context**

I set out to trace approximately two hundred years of political-economic experience concerned with the development of structures to sustain village life - that is before and after the so-called abolition of feudalism in 1812. Initially I had only an intuitive sense of what Stephan R. Epstein, an economic historian, has more recently set on solid empirical foundations: “despite the use of seemingly ‘archaic’ tools [oxen and scratch ploughs], both yield ratios and production for hectare in Sicily up to the Eighteenth century was equivalent to, or higher than, that in most advanced northern European countries (England, Flanders, the Netherlands), and substantially better than in northern Italy or the Baltic regions” [Epstein 1992, 164]. In other words, feudalism and capitalism (and markets) coexisted in varying degrees of success and failure in Sicilian development before the Eighteenth century – this conclusion runs counter to standard accounts in the literature on Sicily and the mafia. Moreover, the North European model of agricultural work is not in itself an indicator of progress; had it actually been adopted in Sicily, it would have caused an economic disaster. Epstein warns us not to project failings in Sicilian agriculture during the Eighteenth century onto previous centuries – another conclusion that helps to refocus our studies.

For reasons explained in chapter 1, I could not have robust data to permit a careful “before-after” evaluative study of the impact of the 1812-1816 changes in the structure of property rights and governmental arrangements in Villalba. My evidence about the community before 1812 is impressionistic. This problem, in my view, did not weaken the discussion in chapter 4 of the reform initiated by the Neapolitan viceroy Domenico Caracciolo in the 1780s, which occurred just about the time when Villalba was being settled. Nor did it weaken my unpacking of the meaning of the abolition of feudalism and the accompanying constitutional reforms of 1812 and 1816. I did clarify what went wrong in the Eighteenth century, why Caracciolo’s attempt to liquidate the heredity of the past met with stiff opposition from the very people he

thought needed to be delivered from bondage, and why by the time Tocqueville visited the island in 1826-27 evocation of the word Sicily conjured up the mental picture of an island and a people plagued by governmental failures and social disintegration.

I found that the chief problem was not the “Anglo-Sicilian” constitution of 1812 but rather its suppression and the extension of absolutist rule in 1816. I showed why “the creation of a legal-rational order *à la* Weber in 1816 represent[ed] a breakdown and *not* the beginning of modernization in Sicily” [Sabetti 2002, 224]. I argued that this was not because the legal-rational order *à la* Weber was imposed from the outside (a *fuorviante* or misleading issue), but because

Rather than facilitate individual and collective efforts on behalf of common interests shared by islanders, (centralized government and administration) created an antithesis of interests between rulers and ruled, and between landowners and landless. The antithesis evolved into successive revolts, culminating in the very collapse of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies and the creation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1860-61. But the iron law of oligarchy inherent in the forced creation of unity through centralized government and administration remained, just as the proprietary claims of great landowners continued to be determinants of the human condition in the countryside [*ibidem*].

I am not suggesting that the creators of Italian unification deliberately set out to victimize people [*ibidem*, 48]. I suggest, instead, that Italian leaders assumed or took for granted that the reconstitution of agricultural and communal activities as a function of their state making - what in other contexts James C. Scott has more recently characterized as “seeing and thinking like a State” [Scott 1998] – would have primarily beneficial effects. I set out to explore the relationship between expectations and results and what ordinary citizens – mostly peasants in this case – can do to cope with the exigencies of life under such circumstances.

Recent historical works by Lucy Riall [1998] and James Fentress [2000] do not use the theoretical distinctions or language of social scientists but they address, in their own fashion, critical issues raised by my work and related inquiries. Riall and Fentress find it useful to go back to the problem of governability under the post-1816 Bourbons. They emphasize the challenges that centralized government and administration faced before and after 1860 with respect to public order and local-central government relations, and they correctly suggest that many of the difficulties in government performance can be attributed to institutional problems, including the issue of how to create an administrative class and secure coordination and compliance through bureaucratic means. Their work can be viewed as complementing my own. My analysis departs from Riall’s analysis and is much closer to that of Fentress on three points.



First, I find untenable Riall's belief that somehow a unification *à la* Gramsci could have realistically taken place if somehow Cavour had stopped being Cavour and had acted like a French Revolutionist; these if/then propositions ignore the actual people and facts on the ground. Second, as Fentress and I discuss, what could more realistically have occurred, and what would have given Cavour and his government greater support, legitimacy and consensus, would be if they had acted upon the political experiment suggested by Ferrara in his 1860 memorandum to Cavour, and if they had ceased to pursue anti-church policies in Sicily where a majority of people were strongly attached to their faith. These possibilities stem from the actual people and facts on the ground, but the rush of events militated against them [see Sabetti 2000, 47-49]. Third, if Riall had looked more closely at the identification and aspirations of Sicilian democrats from the 1840s to the revolt of 1866, she would have found what Fentress presents better than I do: that most Sicilian democrats were not Jacobins, or "Gramscian" *ante litteram*. Most if not all, wanted self-government, independence or autonomy for Sicily based on a revised version of the 1812 constitution;<sup>6</sup> they anticipated that a free labour market together with communal government and parliament recast on the principles of self-government would seriously devalue the property rights of large landowners as determinants of the human condition in the countryside. But, as I tried to show, time they did not have.

By 1814, the Sicilian constitutional barons could neither make use of parliament nor manage public affairs without it. What they needed was a long time span in order to work out or solve the accumulation of governmental issues and problems generated by the constitutional reform experiment – but this they did not have. At the same time, British intervention in Sicilian affairs during the Napoleonic war had given Sicilian leaders hope that British support would serve to maintain conditions favourable to the long-term survival of the new Sicilian constitution. It was, however, an ill-founded hope. British policy in Italy, anchored as it was to Austria, ran precisely against the very survival of the Sicilian constitutional experiment. Thus Sicily's constitutional experiment was ultimately decided not at Palermo but at the Congress of Vienna. And it was the Congress of Vienna that approved the constitution of a centralized system of government and administration uniting both Naples and Palermo under the Bourbon king, now styled as Ferdinand I of the new Kingdom of Two Sicilies

<sup>6</sup> They also wanted to resurrect the symbols of the Sicilian nation, including its flag, coat of arms and parliament, suppressed in 1816. The issue of the Sicilian language, a written language since the Twelfth century and with its own dictionary since the Sixteenth century, is more complicated. Suffice it to say that Sicilian-Italian dictionaries continue to be published and sold to this very day. The last volume of a projected five-volume comprehensive dictionary started in the 1970s appeared by 2004.

– in the famous words of a contemporary historian, making Sicily “a posthumous conquest of Napoleon” [Luigi Blanch, quoted in Rosselli 1956].

### Caught in “the Iron Circle”

In spite of the regime change in the 1860s, Sicilian peasants found themselves locked into what in 1876 Sidney Sonnino<sup>7</sup> called an “iron circle.” Let me quote him at some length:

The situation we found in 1860 persists today [1876...] We have legalized the existing oppression and are assuring the impunity of the oppressors. In modern societies, tyranny of the law is restrained by fears of remedies outside the law. In Sicily, with our institutions patterned on liberal formalism rather than informed by a true spirit of liberty, we have furnished the oppressing classes the legal means to defend their oppression and to take over all public positions by the use and abuse of power that was and continues to be in their hands [Sonnino quoted in Sabetti 1984, 48].

And, in sharp disagreement with the parliamentary commission on Sicilian conditions (R. Bonfadini, Rapporteur), which had just reported that “In Sicily there exists neither a political question nor a social [i.e. agricultural] question” [Giunta per l’inchiesta sulle condizioni della Sicilia 1876], Sonnino continued:

We are now strengthening the oppressors’ hands by reassuring them that, no matter how far they push their oppression, we will not tolerate any kind of illegal remedy, while there can no legal remedy, for they have legality on their side [Sonnino quoted in Sabetti 1984, 48].

This meant two things for most ordinary people in the countryside. On the one hand, they suffered lobar contracts imposed by the monopoly of large landowners or their agents and supported by the arms of the state; on the other, they bore the cost of government, without voice and with little benefit. Most Sicilians were thus left with no legal remedies while the central government would not tolerate any kind of illegal remedy.

How did ordinary people cope with the situation described by Sonnino? I answered this question in chapter 5 of my book *Village Politics and the Mafia in Sicily*. Drawing on archival data of different sources – prefecture, local, pretura, and parliamentary, and diocesan archives – I found that ordinary villagers did so in at

<sup>7</sup> Sidney Sonnino had as traveling companions two other young analysts, Leopoldo Franchetti and Enea Cavaliere. They set out to study Sicilian conditions parallel, and in response, to the 1875 parliamentary commission better known as the Bonfadini Report. Cavaliere interrupted his sojourn in Sicily to travel to Canada and the United States to study the prospects of liberal democracy there. Sonnino later served as prime minister and foreign minister of Italy.

least three ways: armed revolts between 1820 and 1866; unrestricted individualistic action in communal and agricultural activities and in matters of peace and security; and various forms of voluntary collective efforts – a wheat bank, an agrarian association, chain migration and church confraternities as mutual aid societies. More recent studies suggest that I did not sufficiently emphasize the commitment shown in the second half of the Nineteenth century by the Villalba clergy in promoting such undertakings as local civic assets [see Caramma 1995; Lomanto 1994; Naro 1994, 29-57].<sup>8</sup> Still, Sonnino's assessment and my own findings about local concerted action in Nineteenth century Villalba are important for three reasons.

First, Franchetti's often cited views about Sicilian *scioltrezza* take on a different meaning when they are ranged along the analysis of his travelling companion, Sonnino. Franchetti's description of Sicily is "institutions free;" it tells us how individuals may behave when they are locked in a many-person analogue to the prisoner's dilemma. Sonnino provides the missing link in Franchetti's account by telling us about the rules or the constraints of the game. In a similar way, Gramsci's great social disaggregation does not mean that a lack of community concern, or an inability to act, or a proclivity for vertical, clientelistic politics, but rather the presence of governmental institutions that create serious impediments to both voluntary and public initiative.

Second, I discovered in Villalba several civic assets in the form of voluntary associations. These civic assets suggest as untenable Franchetti's, Gramsci's and Putnam's generalizations. What serious difficulties local undertakings experienced in the Nineteenth century were due more to the constraints interposed by the instrumentalities of the central government and by the systemic power of large landowners or rentiers, than to what Mancur Olson in his classic study characterized as the logic of collective inaction.

Third, my findings run against my own expectations at the outset of the study: people did manage to overcome the logic of collective inaction. Membership in the church-sponsored associations generated considerable social capital and led some people, including the then young Calogero Vizzini, by the 1890s to consider jointly doing something about the absence of peace and security in the countryside. Public provision by state police (the stationary bandit) was posing as much danger as the brigands (the roving bandits). The Villalba mafia thus emerged as concerted action to overcome institutional weakness and failure of the public institutions (the stationary banditry) in providing peace and security in the countryside in the face of brigands

<sup>8</sup> The Archangelo Cammarata Center for the Study of Cooperation in San Cataldo and the research by Cataldo Naro have done much to bring out the positive role that church-sponsored associations played in local development and especially in the creation of human and social capital.

(roving banditry). The rise of the Villalba mafia came after other forms of collective action coping with conditions of life rigged against ordinary villagers had been exhausted.

### **Overcoming the Iron Circle: Creating a New Paradox of Power**

Contrary to what much of the scholarly and popular literature since the 1960s would have us believe, the mafia in Villalba is of relatively recent origin; it does not go back to the 1860s. And, more importantly, it started as a form of private protection, with little or nothing to do with large estates. The archival research for the Sicilian interior and coastal towns by Fentress [2000] has added a new, historical, twist to my findings.

Fentress suggests that the story of the mafia must be understood against the background of the uprisings of 1820, 1848, 1860, and 1866 and, more generally, Sicily's struggle for freedom in the first half of the Nineteenth century. Like the text that follows, Fentress found that many of the social and political modes of behaviour that have evolved, and often become ways of life, in Sicily must be understood as responses to strictly political phenomena. Both of us, in fact, both place in sharp relief the political bases of agrarian problems over time. Our respective studies equally stress the importance of the institutional context for understanding of the emergence of the mafia, but variations in the historical and institutional context matter. So just as I found that the mafia of Villalba developed out of a civic, self-help, tradition, so Fentress has found that the mafia of Misilmeri and other coastal towns without large estates developed out of a revolutionary tradition. Our findings are not contradictory but complementary. Our respective research transforms into variable what is often viewed as constant: the emergence of mafia groups as illicit enterprises. Such illicit collective undertakings may solve some problems but they also generate others, as I discovered.

What I found in the case of Villalba does not at all deny the possibility that some mafia groups may have been *ab origine* exploitative counter-governments by estate managers and their armed bands under the protection of large landowners. Nothing in my theoretical perspective or presumptive knowledge would preclude me from ignoring or rejecting this possibility, since men (and women) are not angels and words like swords can kill. Indeed, the potential for the Villalba mafia to become a protection racket and a veritable criminal organization, victimizing villagers and landowners alike through violence, intimidation and silence (*omertà*) was there from the very beginning: an outlaw regime can gain legitimacy through the protection

services it offers and then exploit the position it has acquired, revealing anew all the problems of political organization that plague the lawful regime.<sup>9</sup> The chief problem with the best anthropological and sociological research presumes what must be shown empirically. Consider the following.

Contrary to what it claims, the anthropological work by Anton Blok [1974] does not give us an account of the mafia of a Sicilian village between 1860-1960; it focuses on the period between 1912 and 1922; and even for that period the evidence is very weak. Moreover, Blok also omits what Diego Gambetta [1993, 2] clearly notes: “Violence is a means, not an end; a resource, not the final product.” There remains a serious gap between the model of mafia presented by Blok and the evidence adduced in its support [see also Mangiameli 1989, 193]. Equally, one would hardly know from Blok’s narrative that the village, Contessa Entellina, is an Albanian town with a long history, rich in revolutionary and Socialist tradition, at times combined with intense ethnic conflict. Villagers squarely opposed the Weberian perspective of order and power that informs Blok’s analysis.<sup>10</sup> Equally troubling, Blok leaves us in the dark about the potential for conflict between the local mafia groups and the Socialist (and presumed antimafia) group of Contessa. Just as troubling is the study by Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider. After having chosen the town of Sambuca di Sicilia, “as the focal point of [their] research” [Schneider and Schneider 1976, 9], the two scholars provide little or no evidence about the mafia of that town, its origins and operation. In the post-1945 period, Sambuca gained the reputation of being perhaps the most Communist town in Sicily and became known as “the Moscow of Sicily”. Again, we are left to wonder how Communists coexisted with local mafiosi –or if they were the same persons which would be an important finding. One suspects that the Scheinders’ attempt to place the course of Sicilian development within the framework of world system laid out by Immanuel Wallerstein precluded them from examining the rich history of Sambuca in the State, diocesan, notarial and pretura archives. I found their most recent work on Palermo equally problematic [see my review of Schneider and Schneider 2003, in Sabetti 2003].

By contrast, my research, discussed in chapters 6 to 9, covers the entire life span of the Villalba mafia and goes beyond its collapse in the middle of the 1950s:

- a) the rise of the mafia: 1890s-1908;
- b) the mafia and antimafia in action: 1909-1926;
- c) the re-emergence of the mafia and a new antimafia: 1943-44;

<sup>9</sup> This point has been made in the case of pirates by Peter T. Leeson 2009.

<sup>10</sup> It is doubtful that States have ever possessed an actual monopoly of the use of force, as Michael Taylor [1982, 4-6] notes.

- d) the mafia and antimafia in action: 1944-1952;
  - e) the collapse of the mafia and the antimafia: 1953-1956;
  - f) in the late 1960s, police officials resurrected the Villalba mafia in order to wage the antimafia campaign there, in response to media and political pressures.
- Conclusions about the mafia can be drawn for each phase or block of time.

### Some Lessons

What generalization best captures the entire life span of the Villalba mafia is far from settled and for five complicating reasons. First, with our empiricist epistemology, we have increasingly adopted a positivist, unproblematic view of the monopoly of state powers and neglected to appreciate what Sonnino and Santi Romano appreciated and more recently political scientists like James C. Scott have placed in sharp relief – that is, we have tended to ignore that people, in some basic sense, build their own social and political realities and opportunities, and what officialdom in the formal regime may do is only part of the story. If some concepts or institutions do not work, or are rigged against them, people will make their own adaptations and these may become rather perverse when officialdom thinks it can govern but people go their own way.

Second, the crimes that the Villalba mafia is usually associated with are older than the mafia itself – a point also made by Fentress [2000] for the area he studied – and it is not always easy to distinguish which crimes are mafia's and which are not. Third, whether we like or not, and without discounting the opposition, the Villalba outlaw regime enjoyed the support of many, if not most, villagers who stood to profit from it and who did not regard criminal or illegal everything that was so labelled by State laws. Fourth, short of exiting the village, other alternatives available to local people after 1918 and after 1944 – the antimafia groups – were, if not worse, not always desirable. In fact, the antimafia groups – the Nationalist group after WWI and the Left group after 1944 – came to be viewed as the mirror images of what they sought to destroy. Finally, the polemical use of the term mafia in public discourse has often clouded points one to four.

The mafia as *piovra* has a long and rueful history in polemical writings on Sicilian criminality. Sicilian criminals and the myths and half-truths that surround their activities subsist in different but coterminous worlds, making the task of distinguishing fact from fantasy exceedingly difficult. As noted in chapter 1, as Sicily became another province of united Italy the term mafia was used to label anti-government opposition, including republicans and Bourbon loyalists. Christopher Duggan's work

on Fascism and the mafia [Duggan 1989] is suggestive of the extent to which the notion of the mafia used during Fascism obscured rather than advanced knowledge about Sicily's problems. Duggan's analysis complements what I found for the post-1944 period, up to the 1960s.

At the very least, the history of the Villalba mafia sketched here can serve to answer the question that Giovanni Falcone, the Sicilian antimafia magistrate, raised in his own fashion before he was killed in 1992: "Why is it that men like others, some even endowed with real intellectual abilities, are compelled to devise for themselves a criminal career in order to survive with dignity?" [Falcone 1991, 72]. Other conclusions, not always made explicit in the text, can be more sharply drawn here.

The relative support of the mafia among local people cannot be understood without reference to the actions of those who oppose it – the antimafia forces. In the post-World War I period the antimafia movement came from the nationalist Right and mostly from local professional people; in the post-World War II the antimafia came from the Left divided between those who followed Pantaleone and those who followed Lumia. In my research I discovered that for most villagers, these alternatives were worse, or not better, than the disease they sought to cure. Let me refer briefly to the post-1944 period. What I found is that the ideological choices following World War II made the Left insensitive to the needs of its strongest potential allies (the peasants) in a fashion reminiscent of developments in the North of Italy following World War I. A doctrinaire definition of land reform also did a great deal to drive peasants to the Right – and the equally doctrinaire behaviour of the local Leftists ruled out any early possibility of capturing the protest vote that was there for the taking. There is no place in conventional wisdom for a patron who alienates potential clients by being too ideologically intransigent, and this mistake occurred often among the post-1944 Villalba Left followers. Recent research has revealed that the regional Communist leader Girolamo Li Causi was aware of this problem to the point of having a more nuanced, less Manichean, view of the mafia, even though he had been fired upon in the Villalba square in 1944 [see in particular Mangiameli 2000, 15-16]. But whatever he discussed behind closed doors did not succeed in improving the fortunes of the Left. As noted in an earlier footnote (no. 4), the collapse of the regional association of Left Cooperatives (USCA) by 1949, due to internal corrupt practices, did considerable harm to the trust that ordinary peasants had placed in the Left cooperatives in their quest for land and work.

Again in contrast to prevailing interpretations, I found that, at least in the case of Villalba, it was not the DC (the Christian Democratic Party) that was "captured" by the mafia, but rather the reverse. With its access to immense resources via control

of the regionalist state, the DC undermined the mafia and ensured its rapid demise. By the middle of the 1950s, the DC displaced the Villalba mafia, at about the same time that the Villalba Left coalition vanquished itself. The reader searching my text for evidence of a movement of the mafia from the countryside to the big cities and for the presumed change in the nature of the mafia from an agrarian phenomenon to a “mafia business,” one principally involved in living off development, construction contracts and the drug trade, will be disappointed. I found that villagers who have been leaving the town since the 1890s to go to places like Albenga in North Italy, Buffalo, New York, Montreal, Quebec, La Plata Argentina, or Trenton, New Jersey did not bring the local mafia with them. The Villalba mafia did not move on to greater opportunities elsewhere and does not quite fit what the recent work of Federico Varese [2011] suggests. Of all the generations of villagers who emigrated – and there were some former mafiosi in the post-1950 wave of emigration - I was able to track down only one villager who turned to a life of crime in Philadelphia in the late 1930s. His case seems an isolated one and it is not strong enough to suggest anything like the Villalba mafia on the move for he grew up in Philadelphia before the Second World War. When in the 1950s he did try to call up the name of “Don Calò” to assert his authority in Philadelphia, his assertions were not taken seriously by his associates.

The Villalba mafia ended in Villalba itself. This is so because, as I tried to show, the mafia phenomenon is not constant but variable in terms of finding partners in crime, demand-driven product illegality, criminal opportunities, laws and regulations of government as well as in terms of time and place contingency. The mafia of Calogero Vizzini does not fit the 1980s model of Cosa Nostra.<sup>11</sup> Even in the Cosa Nostra manifestation, it is an exaggeration to view, as I show in my *The Search for Good Government* [Sabelli 2000], mafia groups as some sort of privatized Leviathan. When we extend the analysis to Palermo and its surroundings, we have to deal with several dimensions not always taken into account by the conventional view:

- a) the ontology of the mafia in question;
- b) the strength of the criminal underworld;
- c) the price of crime and why crime pays;
- d) bureaucratic politics, clientelism and institutionalized corruption;
- e) police and prosecutorial strategies;
- f) responses from civil society associated with the Leoluca Orlando administration;

<sup>11</sup> I have pursued this examination in Sabetti 2000, chapters 6-7; for what we can learn from some of the best North American studies on organized crime, see, among others DiBella, Sabetti, and Tremblay 2000.



g) why mafia groups cannot be long-term alternatives to the stationary bandit we call the state.

A chief conclusion identified in my research remains: the Sicilian problem is ultimately grounded in the structure of authority relationships that impinges upon the pursuit of individual and joint or collective opportunities. What lessons, then, from my research are still applicable to the new millennium?

### **A Future without the Mafia**

In preparation for the second edition of *Political Authority in a Sicilian Village*, I returned to Sicily in March 2002 and revisited the village where I had done fieldwork over the course of the 1970s and the early 1980s. I have kept up with developments since then, and so I am in a position to respond to the question.

Unlike the case of most other Sicilian and Southern villages, the Villalba population has remained around 2000; in the past twenty years there has been on average an equal number of births and deaths annually (about 28). What helps to explain the relatively stable population is not just a widespread strong preference to live in Villalba [Sabetti 2002, 25], increasingly made it more attractive to those who work outside by better roads, and a slow but steady growth in public employment [*ibidem*, 219], but also a renewed confidence in the local economy. The rediscovery of agriculture as a source of income was already noticeable in the late 1970s [*ibidem*, 207-08]. Agricultural activities have continued to grow in part because of increasing outside demands for local specialities like lentils and tomatoes, in part because they give local people a sense of self-reliance and personal satisfaction and also in part because communal policies since the middle of the 1970s have encouraged brand-name recognition of some local delicacies (the “lentils of Villalba” and the *siccagnu* tomato). Since then, every summer, in fact, there have been local produce festivals, held in conjunction with festivities in honour of the village’s patron saint; these generate publicity beyond Sicily and attract a lot of outside people, not just expatriates. Two brothers who left many years ago as blacksmiths to work in Piedmont have returned to Villalba as electrical-mechanical entrepreneurs to set up what local people call “our little Fiat”. By 1998, they employed twenty workers full time to make aluminium products and to do automobile-part work for a Fiat plant elsewhere in Sicily. The two entrepreneurs are now trying to diversify their production by building, among others, special ovens for drying tomatoes and other vegetables for export. But all these wealth-producing activities are not easily translatable into official statistics, largely because most of the people who generate this wealth do not consider themselves fully employed – i.e.,

they still see themselves as looking for secure employment or as aspiring to work at something better. Not surprisingly, but most erroneously, official statistics in 1995 ranked Villalba as the commune with the highest rate of unemployment (70%) in Italy [cited in *La Sicilia*, 12].

There are also reasons to be optimistic when we turn to politics. The unused capacity at lawful communal self-government noted in the text is being released as a result of several factors that have come together in the past twenty years. By 1978, village politics had culminated with the breakdown of the Demochristian hegemony and with a Left coalition in charge of communal politics. The Left coalition managed to stay in power for a few years and then gave way again to a new Demochristian administration. The insistence on providing communal services continued to take precedence over party control and internal party squabbles. There have been four other communal governments since the early 1980s, but what has not changed is the commitment of different administrations to act on behalf of community interests and concerns, albeit expressed in different ways and emphasis. These changes in local political life are partly due to a new generation of community leaders anxious not to repeat the mistakes of their fathers and committed to provide good government. But the changes are also partly due to other factors: the collapse of the postwar party system, which did not occur as predicted in [Sabelli 2002, 240;] the renewed efforts of national and regional governments, following the Bassanini laws of decentralization, to return some of their authority over communal affairs to local elected officials at the very same time when policies of the European Union are reaching more and more directly to citizens. Like most other communes now, the Villalba commune has its own charter of self-rule brought in the mid 1990s in consultation with the entire population. This charter, which some villalbesi grandiosely see as “our own chapters of the land” recalling those of pre-1812 times, can be found, with other information, on the web.<sup>12</sup> Since the 2000 local election, the mayor is a cardiologist who listed politics as his hobby on the commune’s web page. As a general rule, the delivery of public services from the field offices of the national and regional bureaucracy such as health services over which the Villalba commune has managed to have some say and control has increased and improved considerably in the past twenty years – to make Villalba part of the Sicily that works [see Deidda 2001]. Some problems like water remain, however, but these are not within the grasp of the local government and the community – they are part of the Sicily that does not work. All in all, it is fair to say that the case of Villalba in the past twenty years suggests that, contrary to the Prince of Lampedusa’s famous saying, things do not change to remain the

<sup>12</sup> See [www.comune.villalba.cl.it](http://www.comune.villalba.cl.it).

same. Things can change for the better. Roving banditry is gone and the State form of stationary banditry is being challenged by Sicilians as they struggle to constitute and sustain productive orders.

### **Implications for the Practice of Research**

In reflecting on my work in Sicily, I have often thought of Tocqueville's words in the foreword of his *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. Let me paraphrase him somewhat. While I have written without any *parti pris* (and I have no affective ties to Sicily and its inhabitants), it would be futile to deny that my own feelings were engaged. What social scientist can write on such a contentious topic, often been used to promote anti-Italian stereotypes in the Anglophone world, in a spirit of complete detachment? I made my own Tocqueville's method of work: "My method has been that of the anatomist who dissects each defunct organ with a view to eliciting the laws of life, and my aim has been to supply a picture that while scientifically accurate, may also be instructive" [Tocqueville 1956, xii].

I feel confident about my work being accurate, but will leave it to others to decide if my own published research has been instructive. Has my work effected a shift in the way social scientists think about the Weberian state, the paradox of power, principal-agent relations, the ontology of the mafia and the government wars on the mafia and thus formulate better conceptions and better research designs? I see little evidence of that. But if social scientists are willing to stretch their vistas beyond stereotypes and impressionist accounts as well as self-deceiving notions of *impegno civile*, they will find in the past and present Sicily a long-enduring culture of self-government and a rich laboratory of institutional experiments that can enrich their professional life – as it happened in my case.

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## Stationary Bandits

### Lessons from the Practice of Research from Sicily

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**Abstract:** Drawing on the author's earlier publications, the paper retraces the emergence, evolution and collapse of the Villalba mafia and antimafia in a historical, "before-after," perspective, providing an in-depth analysis of the effects of the abolition of feudalism in 1812, the unification of Italy in 1860-61, and subsequent regime changes on village politics in Sicily. The paper shows that rational choice institutionalism can be productively extended to the study of Italian history and political economy to do several things: to integrate the abstract and the concrete, to dig deeper than previous studies about what, when, how and why the business of protection actually manifested itself, and to overcome "the great antinomy" between ideal types and real types about the mafia and Sicily. Drawing on his many years of field work experience, the author calls for a shift in the way social scientists think about the Weberian state, the paradox of power, principal-agent relations, the ontology of the mafia and the various government wars on the mafia so as to formulate better conceptions and more powerful research designs.

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*Keywords:* Sicily; mafia; research practice; collective-action dilemmas; organized crime.

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