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Tracey Heatherington, Wild Sardinia. Indigeneity and the Global Dreamtimes of Environmentalism. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2010, 314 pp.

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Book reviews

Tracey Heatherington, *Wild Sardinia. Indigeneity and the Global Dreamtimes of Environmentalism*. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2010, 314 pp.

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The conflict on the creation of a national park in the central areas of Sardinia is the setting that Tracey Hetherington (TH) has chosen to study the deploying of an environmental policy in a rural zone where she had realized 2-3 years ethnographic fieldwork (for the preparation of her PhD dissertation). As in the work of Michael Herzfeld – who was her supervisor – we find a strong effort towards the theorization, along with a deep involvement in the ethnographic work and reflexivity. For the quality of the research work and the continual and wide reflexion on literature this book is appreciable and honest. The central question of the book might be synthesized with this statement: “Why should some Sardinians be so wayward as to reject the opportunities promised by the creation of a national park?” [p. xxii]. The book seeks, thus, to find the rationale of the resistance of the citizens and institutions of the town of Orgosolo to the project – (D.P.R. 30/03/1998) – to include their territory into the wide park area.

Following Herzfeld, TH presents her conceptual frame questioning the “nature of indigeneity.” The choice of the field is not anodyne. Orgosolo’s fame is charged with symbolisms nourished by a solid chain of representations produced by the work of anthropologists, journalists, writers and novelists, film-makers, politicians and social activists, along one century and a half (depending on the type of intellectual profession, of course). This symbolic work has contributed to organize the discourses of the natives about themselves with the aim of producing acceptable and useful self-definitions and social representations. Thus, this fieldwork turns out to be interesting and, at the same time, dangerous.

The book is divided into five parts but it may be divided into three main sections: the first section (chapters 1-3) focuses on the opposition of viewpoints with respect to ecology and landscape; the second section (chapters 4-7) focuses on the question of cultural representation; the last part (chapters 8-9) is a critical and reflexive analysis of the field research. These sections are profoundly diverse in terms of style and attitude, and that makes us suppose the last one to be an “a posteriori” systematization.

In the first chapters the narrative style is often complicated and unresolved. The reader is bounced in an intricate succession of ethnographic reports, ethnographic reflections, theoretical exercises and critical quotation of existing literature. Instead, the Introduction and the Part V – written later – present a less intricate and sophisticated narrative style. In this parts TH gives an account of her fieldwork and does her exercise of reflexivity. The objective of the book is clarified and the discourse on local culture and society nuanced.

The theoretical focus of the book can be found in the critique of “global environmentalism,” which is represented as a global philosophy with its historical conception and global scale of values. Following Argyrou (*The logic of environmentalism*, 2005), TH

asserts that “environmentalism has all the features of modernity” for its “universalistic pretention” [pp. 231-232]. The model of global sustainable development advanced by international NGOs, especially WWF, is considered as a dominant one. It’s a case of what Herzfeld (*The body impolitic: Artisans and artifice in the global hierarchy of value*, 2004) called the “global hierarchy of value” which makes appear all local cultures as “commensurate and interchangeable.” Following Argyrou and Herzfeld, TH affirms: “The moral discourses of the global environmentalism always subordinate the needs, aspirations, sovereignty of smaller groups to apparently transcendent universal values” [pp. 231-232].

Thus, the conflict between *two philosophies of the conservation* – the environmentalism and “anthropologism” – is the underlying canvas of the book. The first is accused to impose a global philosophy of development supported by central powers and companies, the “global dreamtimes of environmentalism,” whereas, according to the second, local cultures are strictly linked to the ecological dimension and the conservation of landscape. TH presents this conflict as an irresolvable one, but in the last three pages of the book – in the paragraph titled “post-environmentalisms” – she indicates the possibility of according local culture and environmentalism.

This last part (chapters 8-9) is the only really connected with the introduction of the book that was very promising: “my account contradicts a number of strategic political narratives that have reified two-sided oppositions such as ‘community’ vs. the ‘state’ or ‘traditional’ vs. progressive or ‘modern’ citizens. Instead, I have attempted to describe a set of contingent, transitional narratives about environment, development, and cultural identity in Sardinia during the main period of my research in the late 1990s.” The reader is full of hope when she attests that “there is, paradoxically, no unifying story of ‘resistance’ here” [pp. xiii].

Nevertheless, from the first chapter, the anthropologist’s outlook appears “captive.” A romantic and unitary image of the history of Orgosolo is presented. Historiography and anthropology of Sardinia are both used as authoritative sources and melted with witnesses’ sentences extrapolated from historical and anthropological vulgates. One example is the assertion that the history of the Park is a case of neo-colonialism directly linked to the colonial history of Sardinia. This is a leitmotif that also reappears in the last part of the book, showing that the author really believes in this political construction.

Such an image of Sardinia has not any scientific foundation but it’s been a current topic in the political debate since the sixties, and today it represents a local common sense. It’s not clear what “colonial” and “neo-colonial” means when TH refers to Sardinia. Moreover it’s difficult to understand in which period (and way) Sardinia has been a colony. In general, locals use the notion of colonisation as a synonymous of domination. In every case, this representation has to be demonstrated and not considered as foundational and taken for granted. This confusion is unfavourable to get a correct comprehension of history, culture and politics in Sardinia. Furthermore, it’s incorrect from a methodological standpoint. The deconstruction work renounces to question one of the cultural constructs that contribute to feature the notion of *indigeneity*. Certainly, Sardinia has been dominated in the Italian political space but the parallel proposed between Native Americans and Sardinians, between the history of Sardinia and the story of Far West, is amusingly unfounded.

In spite of her initial statement, the unity and coherence of the representations constructed by the Orgolesi (citizens of Orgosolo) is not really discussed (except in the last part). Generally, social differences are erased and interests are confused. Only in the last chapters they are taken into account. In the narrative flux, past and present are jumbled. Accounts made by different witnesses are chained to create evidence, without questioning the differences that could destroy the “proofs.” In fact, social differences are perceived but ignored or unified in the mystical identification with the Commons: “Various individuals’ visions of local development may diverge to emphasize herding over forestry, tourism over environmental protection, or new measures of ecological protection [...]. These multiple visions of possibility are nevertheless embedded in a sense of positive, inherited, communal tradition. Nostalgic futures are literally grounded in Orgosolo’s Commons” [p. 97]. In this identification, the history of Orgosolo is brought back to unity. The opposition to the Enclosures (Enclosure Act, 1820) in the nineteenth century and the opposition to the Park have – in the anthropologic imagination – the same nature.

The sacred images of the landscapes confirmed by every witness bring the anthropologist to forget that the use of the commons has been (and it could be) the cause of bloody conflicts. Furthermore, the enchanted eye of the local guide – doubled by the anthropologist view – forgets that in central Sardinia all big mammals have been exterminated and the existing ones can live safely only within restricted and protected forests situated in some “civilized” areas in south and north Sardinia. Charmed by the magnificent landscape of Monte Giovanni, the author did not see the wide desertification in the neighbouring areas, which was caused not only by the ancient “colonial” exploitation of the forests, but also by the intensive grazing of goats inhibiting natural growth of trees and underwood.

The unified representation in the sacralisation of Commons produces a mirage, in which TH herself believes, where hunters, herders and tourism entrepreneurs are supposed to share the same conception of the nature and of the use of the land [pp. 95-98]. TH opposes the intimate fusion of culture and nature incorporated by indigenous and manifested in their spiritual vision of their material life to the bureaucratic pretention to manage the territories, considered as a negation of human work and culture.

More seriously, within the research project the researcher did not explore the totality of the field. The viewpoint of the actors involved in environmentalist actions is obliterated or caricatured. The legitimate critic on environmentalism as a culture, policy and practice could have brought the researcher to abandon sane objectivity. Thus, the rhetoric emphasising local rights forgets that they could be the justification for various forms of deregulation in building, hunting, fishing, exploiting territories, and so on, matched with political, economical, industrial and often illegal interests. TH completely misses this focus.

The “second section” of the book takes into account the production of stereotyped images that outsiders and scholars produce in their work of objectivation [pp. 113-115]. These images, according to the author, fix Sardinians into a timeless backwardness. Following Herzfeld, TH claims that the narratives produced by outsiders contribute to the imagination of cultural alterity as well as to the production of an acceptable identity that local communities oppose against the dark representation restlessly conveyed by mass

media. The previous anthropological alterity is now transformed in a sort of “ecological alterity” [p. 132]. Here, TH clarifies her viewpoint: “the methods of environmental concern [...] are all methods of exerting authority, discipline, and control over the Sardinian Supramonte, seen as a dark frontier” [p. 132]. State control and acculturation processes are now transposed into environmental policies. Here one can see again at work the irreducible opposition, stated by Pigliaru in the fifties, between a “Barbagia’s code” and a “State’s code.” TH goes so far as to consider that the rise of global environmentalism, with its global hierarchy of values, indicates “one of the subtler, but most nefarious, forms of globalisation” [p. 134]. WWF is sharply criticized: “like the Italian state, big environmental NGOs are focused on managing not only nature, but also culture” [p. 138]. Maybe it’s true, but there is a lack of information about the WWF actors. NGOs, States, outsiders of all sorts (also Sardinians from the coasts), are put in a unified and simplified representation of perversity.

In the part dedicated to “resistance,” the purpose is to oppose the internal ethnographical perspective to the external image of backwardness. In the author’s words, “this perspective reveals the practices of ‘resistance’ to be the outcome of reasoning political subjectivities grounded in the self-reflexive embodiment of history, identity and experience” [p. 163]. A specific cultural politics arises, among locals, within the conflict with the State and the WWF, opposing the local culture of land-managing to the “cultural orientations advocates by global environmentalism.”

The Chapter 7, titled “Sin, Shame and Sheep,” shows a more nuanced views of Orgosolo society and culture. At last, TH focuses on the contradictions and divisions within the local practices and the notion of ‘resistance’. This attitude is reinforced in the last part of the book. Here, TH points out her own political purpose: “I shared with Sardinian interlocutors a critical standpoint on the kinds of global discourses articulated by wilderness movements, including WWF” [p. 208].

This stance represents the very origin of the critical elements contained in a book that, on the other hand, has to be appreciated for the robustness of the fieldwork, the wideness of references and the profoundness of the inquiry. Actually, however, the core part of the book is biased by a militant purpose. Anthropology seems to be enrolled as a “weapon of the weak” (J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*, 1985) in the battle for the recognition of local and dominated cultures. As anthropology (as the other social sciences) is not exempt from mechanisms of cultural, linguistic, academic and geo-political domination, one may call it “the global dreamtimes of anthropology.”

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