

REVIEW OF

FROM CLANS TO CO-OPS: CONFISCATED MAFIA LAND IN SICILY BY THEODOROS RAKOPOULOS

REVIEWED BY JAMES WINDLE

Theodoros Rakopoulos presents a readable, yet theoretically rich, critical assessment of an agricultural project promoted by the Italian government as a significant victory against the mafia. The book explores the lived experiences of farmers working on, and administrators managing, two cooperatives in the village of San Giovanni. The cooperatives operate on land confiscated from the mafia by the Italian government. *From Clans to Co-ops* covers a lot of ground. It's at once a critical assessment of an agricultural cooperative, and the wider cooperative movement and, an insightful account of the anti-mafia movement and the social embeddedness of the mafia in rural Sicily.

The discussion is well balanced with the monograph gradually becoming more critically of the cooperative movement. The early chapters lay out some of the benefits of the project, of which there are many: notably on page two when a *mafioso* complains of his workforce demanding better pay and working conditions as a result of the cooperatives. The book, however, gradually unpicks snags in the anti-mafia cooperative movement. The second and final chapters focus upon the unequal power relationships between the cooperatives

middle class administrators and working class farmers, and the administrators inability to grasp the 'local social arrangements' (p.14) governing village life. The administrators are portrayed as crusading moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963), whose primary aim is to disrupt the mafia's power base by pilfering social capital from them. The primary tool being the payment of better (state regulated) wages. Indeed, this conflict over social capital is played out well in chapter eight when mafia bosses support farmers during protests against poor prices paid by wineries. Rakopoulos highlights here how both the mafia and anti-mafia use versions of history to make 'ideological claims' of equality with farmers when, in reality, both are 'segregated' from the farmers 'across class differences' (p.167).

The ethnography also demonstrates how integrated the mafia are in village life: politically and economically (i.e. as landowners and employers), as criminals with the means to coerce and threaten, but also as local individuals embedded in social networks. The mafia are not portrayed as one-dimensional movie bad guys, but integral characters in local life. This is often portrayed through the mingling of farmers and *mafioso* in local bars, but also in chapter nine's description of a land border dispute between a *mafioso* and the cooperative. While the administrators publicly portrayed zero tolerance, and initially refused to informally engage with the *mafioso*, the farmers involved in the dispute identified with

the landowner as their neighbour who deserved to be respected as customs dictate.

Indeed, Rakopoulos does well to unpick the internal conflicts the administrators faced. Their public face may have espoused zero tolerance and total detachment from the mafia, yet local reality meant that they often had to adopt a more practical approach: from sharing a coffee to informal disputes over borders. Much of the book highlights this conflict between the practical and the moral. The administrators are seen to bend their own rules whilst criticising the cooperative farmers for not being 'sufficiently anti-mafia' (p.84) and, for demanding a steady wage and stable employment. Overall, there's a strong feeling that the administrators, while well-meaning, were playing politics with the livelihoods of the working poor.

The monograph left me wondering whether something similar were possible in Ireland. We also have socially excluded areas which are alienated from the state and suffer predatory organised crime groups who govern the activities of local people. Amoral, socially embedded, familism is the defining characteristic of organised crime in both Southern Italy and Ireland (see Hourigan et al., 2018). As in Sicily, the confiscation of businesses (be it urban rather than rural in the Irish context) could build political capital whilst providing much needed employment.

The limits of such an approach in Ireland may lay in chapter three, which situates the present ethnography in a deep historical context: Sicily has a long tradition of cooperatives as a site of resistance to repression from the mafia and the state. Consequently, cooperative workers were motivated not only by money but the prestige of being part of a, often bloody and repressed, lineage of worker-activists, at least in an ideological sense (I'm surprised that Rakopoulos failed to notice the irony that both the mafia and anti-mafia are strengthened by the 'largely imagined' [p.82] legacy of their respective formations). The

farmer/administrator split is once again apparent here. Both farmer and administrator are portrayed as proud of their anti-mafia credentials, however, the administrator's secure in a middle-class occupation while the farmer has other pressing concerns: co-existing with the mafia and putting food on the table.

My main criticism is that some chapters are too theoretically top-heavy, and could have used the insider voice to a greater extent. While the theoretical discussion are interesting and important - ethnography without theory is little more than journalism - I would expect an ethnography to allow greater space for the words of participants rather than more abstract discussions. Chapter six, for example, presents an interesting discussion on the use of gossip by the administrators to police farmers and the mafia, yet insider voices represent a minor element in a largely theoretical chapter. This felt like a missed opportunity for greater insight.

Overall, the book should have wide appeal, and will be of interest to scholars of co-operatives, organised crime and counter-organised crime. While the books primary subject is cooperatives, it would sit comfortable with other ethnographies of organised crime (i.e. Paoli, 2008). Moreover, it provides an important critical dimension to the growing literature on the use of economic development to counter organised crime and illicit enterprise (i.e. Felbab-Brown, 2012; Windle, 2016), especially the power inequalities inherent in such endeavours.

References

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