



Francesco Benigno, *La mala setta. Alle origini di mafia e camorra 1859-1878*. Torino : Einaudi, 2015, 403 p., ISBN 978-88-06-22441-7.

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1689>
DOI: 10.4000/chs.1689
ISSN: 1663-4837

Publisher

Librairie Droz

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2016
Number of pages: 403
ISBN: 978-2-600-01953-8
ISSN: 1422-0857

Electronic reference

Michel Huysseune, « Francesco Benigno, *La mala setta. Alle origini di mafia e camorra 1859-1878*. Torino : Einaudi, 2015, 403 p., ISBN 978-88-06-22441-7. », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 20, n°2 | 2016, Online since 01 December 2018, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1689> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.1689>

This text was automatically generated on 23 September 2020.

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- 1 This book is an important contribution to the debates on the origins of organized crime in Italy and, because of the historical role of Italy in the emergence of the phenomenon, therefore also highly relevant for an understanding of organized crime in general. It explicitly proposes itself as revisionist, since it intends to contest the presently dominant narrative that argues for an organizational continuity of Mafia and Camorra since their ill-understood origins generally dated in the mid-nineteenth century, and tends to project the present characteristics of organized crime into the past. This paradigm, itself emerging after the important court cases against organized crime of the 1980s and 1990s, definitely attested the importance of the organizational structure of the Mafia in particular, hence putting an end to controversies on its very organizational existence.
- 2 Against this approach, *La mala setta* proposes to take a new look at the period between 1859 and 1878, preceding and following Italian Unification in 1860-1861. This interest is not new, since studies on the origins of the Mafia and the Camorra have often focused on this particular time-period, when contemporary sources first mention these organizations, or rather use the terms Mafia and Camorra. In the past, these studies did not reach entirely convincing conclusions, but they did draw attention to the importance of the political context, and in particular raised the question of the relationship between criminals and various political actors, especially groups involved in violent action. This is exemplified by the obvious parallels between the initiation rituals of, for example, the Mafia and those of freemasonry and of the Carbonari.
- 3 Benigno's research returns to this period. It focuses on the two most important cities in the former monarchy of the Two Sicilies, Naples and Palermo, each of them loci of

power with a concentrated presence of regional political and social elites, but also cities that the new Italian authorities perceived as dangerous and turbulent. Benigno proposes to reread both official and unofficial sources on Naples and Palermo from the period 1859-1878. Instead of scrutinizing them for clues that would reveal the presence of Mafia and Camorra as previous research tended to do, he highlights two important elements. In the first place, he draws attention to the confusion that effectively characterizes these sources, and how a comprehensive overview of these sources provides very few, if any, elements that would confirm the existence of organized crime. Secondly he analyses how many sources in fact offer pre-set narrations on criminality. Following a discourse that originated in post-revolutionary France, he highlights these sources as reflecting a society focusing on the “dangerous classes”, whereby the dangers of social upheaval and criminal behavior coincided. As he points out, official Italian interest in crime, not surprisingly, always increased with political upheavals, in particular a revolt in Palermo in 1866 and the Paris Commune. In those years, various forms of unlawful behavior were routinely attributed to criminal groups – often referred to as criminal sects – that were at the same time denounced as ‘internationalists’, partisans of the First International, while the effective partisans of this organization were denounced as criminals.

- 4 This discourse on the dangerous classes was accompanied by the practice of authorities and police forces to manipulate political and criminal groups, a practice particularly well established in the case of France. Benigno’s research sheds new light on the importance of similar practices in Italy, highlighting how they were not limited to Southern Italy. He draws attention to a forgotten example of police manipulation of criminal activities in pre-Unification Turin, and a better known example of persecution of political opponents as presumed criminals in Ravenna. While previous authors tended to perceive this phase as a moment when authorities made use of existent criminal networks, Benigno’s hypothesis is exactly the opposite, namely that as far as the existence of such groups can be established, they were often set up by the very authorities that denounced them. His book provides numerous examples of such involvement of authorities, and these examples allow him to hypothesize that criminals were in fact moulded by a process whereby marginalized groups learn to adapt themselves to the models of criminality provided by mainstream culture, such as the criminal sect.
- 5 Benigno’s book situates itself within the so-called cultural turn in criminology which highlights the importance of contextual interpretations and understandings of crimes. However, in line with recent scholarship on southern Italy he also intends to deconstruct prevalent negative stereotypes on the region. Particularly in the study of organized crime, scholars have frequently argued that its continuous presence in some regions reflects its social and cultural embeddedness in the societies concerned. A number of canonic texts published in the 1870s have played a crucial role in this process and are still important references in contemporary Italian debates on organized crime : Pasquale Villari’s *Lettere meridionali*, and the *L’inchiesta sulla Sicilia* by Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino. What these texts have in common is their association of cultural backwardness and the presence of organized crime, in what Benigno denounces as a tautological circle whereby organized crime is both cause and consequence of backwardness. At the same time, these texts all omit what is crucial for understanding the emergence of Mafia and Camorra : the active intervention of authorities to support such groups for political reasons, a habitual manipulation of

violence that was not limited specifically to this period (an example would be the opaque relations between extreme right terrorism and parts of the state apparatus in the 1970s), nor to Italy.

- 6 As many deconstructive and revisionist contributions, *La mala setta* raises as many questions as it answers. The author himself points out that his essentially urban outlook should be extended to research on smaller towns and the countryside, and also to renewed studies of the banditry that played such an important role in rural southern Italy in the decade after Unification. The book nevertheless provides a convincing critique of prevalent interpretations of the origins of organized crime, and important clues to a new understanding of this crucial historical phase. As such, it provides both a stimulus and a number of methodological tools for a more comprehensive revision of the early history of organized crime in Italy.