

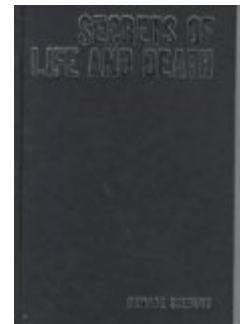
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Renate Siebert. *Secrets of Life and Death: Women and the Mafia*. London and New York: Verso Books, 1996. xi + 333 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85984-023-8; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85984-903-3.

Reviewed by Paola Sensi-Isolani (Saint Mary's College of California)  
Published on H-SAE (November, 1997)



In *Secrets of Life and Death: Women and the Mafia*, the author, German sociologist Renate Siebert who teaches at the University of Calabria, provides us with a “double reading of the mafia phenomenon” (p. 4). At one level the book’s discourse centers on the author’s own perceptions, sensibilities, curiosity and reactions as a woman to the Mafia, an institution that is almost exclusively male. On the other hand Siebert documents and analyzes the involvement of women, as resisters to, as well as victims or accomplices of, the Mafia. The author thus tries to combine attention to the subjective experience of the Mafia with a theoretical analysis, in order to produce a work that interweaves subjectivity with objectivity.

Siebert divides her work into three parts. The first part looks at the Mafia through the prism of gender, the second looks at the direct involvement of women with the Mafia, and the last examines various actions that women have taken to resist the Mafia. It is good that the book ends on this positive note of female empowerment because in the first two parts the reader is overwhelmed with despair as scenes of wanton violence and institutional collusion seem to repeat themselves endlessly.

The first part, comprised of five sections, looks at various aspects of the Mafia as institution, from a feminist and personal perspective. All-male initiation rites, the culture of hunting and banquets, and the culture of blood and violence are briefly analyzed within the context of concepts of virility and masculinity. The author’s psychological analysis exposes Mafia men’s homophobia, while emphasizing at the same time the strong component of sublimated homosexual desire in the bond connecting them. She concludes that Mafia men are marked with a radical ambivalence in relation to the feminine.

In this section, the author identifies woman’s role within the Mafia family as neither peasant nor bourgeois, but rather as a hybrid of the worst aspects of each. Siebert believes that in Mafia families, women are denied “both the de facto power which prevailed in the peasant family, and the access to formal equality and emancipation typical of the lower-middle and middle-class family.” While one might want to disagree with typifying woman’s status in lower middle and middle class families as one of emancipation and equality, something which in the area of family law has only taken place in Italy within the last thirty years, one cannot disagree with Siebert’s contention that the Mafioso’s public role presupposes a total hold over the private sphere. The author refers to Gay Talese’s *Honor Thy Father* as well as Joe Bonanno’s autobiography to demonstrate the different roles that mothers, sons and daughters have in Mafia families. (One might question whether these are reliable sources for a scholarly work.) Siebert looks at the issue of morality as it relates to women, typifying it as deeply bourgeois—it isn’t clear, however, why the author thinks this is exclusively bourgeois—i.e., marriage in Mafia families is seen as indissoluble, other men’s wives are to be respected, Mafia men may have mistresses while wives, mothers, and daughters are to remain chaste, etc. The author contends that women themselves in Mafia culture are complicit in a process whereby they bring up their sons to depend on them yet to believe in their own superiority, while at the same time confirming in them the negative value of the female. The last chapters of this first section focus on the relationship between Mafia and Fascism, Siebert making the strong case that while they were antagonistic to each other, this was because of a rivalry for power since both are identical when it comes to such

central features as the relationship to death, to authority and to women. The author dwells at length on the phenomenon of *pentitismo*, and then on those women such as Rita Atria and Rosetta Cerminara, who had the courage to testify against the Mafia. The fact that the trials often end in convictions which are eventually reversed makes one understand both the hopelessness of the situation, and the price these women have to pay.

The second part of the book looks at women's direct involvement in Mafia criminality. The author observes that within the Mafia, women's roles oscillate between complicity and estrangement. She points out that the changes that society is undergoing, its increasing consumerism, together with the process of individuation and the emancipation of women, have coincided to give women a more active role within the Mafia. Mothers, wives, sisters, daughters and daughters-in-law of Mafiosi serve as front women for a variety of activities, from drug trafficking to involvement in family businesses. Making reference to Salvatore Lupo's work on the Mafia, heavily influenced by Anton Blok's analysis of Mafia organization (this is the only time in the book that Siebert refers to previous scholarship on the Mafia), Siebert contends that together with other marginal people, women are not part of the Mafia's power syndicate but rather work in the enterprise syndicate's financial and economic offshoots. Siebert typifies women's complicity as either sporadic and motivated by need, or organic. It is sporadic for example, when poor women become drug dealers in order to meet the needs of their families. It is organic for those wives and cohabiting partners who provide irreplaceable material and emotional support for their Mafia men. Lacking documentation in this area other than a few direct testimonies and a lot of popular fiction, Siebert makes what she defines as an effort of imagination and inference to ask herself who these complicitous women are, and what they think. The author points out that, shielded by a legal system that regards them as not responsible because seen as subordinate to their men, Mafia women can function as important channels for money laundering and other illegal activities. The author makes the point that, currently, women also play a part in some violent Mafia operations. With involvement at all these levels, however, the author contends that women do not operate as equals to men because, while their cooperation is desired, it is only desired under conditions of subjugation and dependence.

The last and longest section of the book looks at various aspects of women's resistance to the Mafia. Under the heading of "Moral Familism," Siebert turns Banfield's

amoral familism on its head, defining as moral familism the civil and political resistance rooted in personal familial emotions which takes place when an individual stricken by the loss of a loved one prevails upon justice and claims the right to life for his or her family. While not exclusively the province of women, Siebert points out that women have been particularly involved in this process, both because they have often been affected by Mafia violence through their attachments to men and because the socialization of women has impelled them to give more importance to human relationships. Siebert documents the experiences of women from every social background who were impelled to action as a result of the loss of a loved one, be it father, brother, son, or husband. While this section is full of hope, it is also filled with hopelessness as women's testimony is ignored by the legal system, and as time after time convictions are either dismissed for lack of evidence or overturned. Siebert points out that while in the past women who served as witnesses stood alone against a hostile judicial system as well as often against a hostile family and community, organizations such as the Association of Sicilian Women against the Mafia and the Giuseppe Impastato Sicilian Centre for Documentation now give support to witnesses. Joint political activism by women against the Mafia began in 1980, when signatures were collected for a petition to speed up anti-Mafia legislation. Since that time, with the increasing murders of innocent victims, many of them judges, policemen and carabinieri who were looking into Mafia activities, as well as professionals and businessmen who refused Mafia intimidation, the issue has been brought into the sphere of civil rights and individual freedoms. Siebert's concluding chapter, *Between Killing and Dying There's a Third Way: Living*, describes two acts of public protest, the outcome of the bloodletting of the summer of 1992, when Judge Giovanni Falcone, his wife and three body guards and later Judge Paolo Borsellino with five bodyguards were massacred. The public display of sheets outside houses as well as the Fasting Women of Palermo were concrete gestures of solidarity and resistance, giving everyone a sense of shared opposition to the Mafia.

The titles and subtitles of the various sections, as well as the title of the book, give a tabloid overtone to this work. Headings such as "A Men-only Society," "Honour, Shame, Vendetta," "Love and Sexuality," "Compulsion to Kill," "Mafiosa? No, just a Wife," "Drug-Pushing Mothers," "The Bosses' Women," "The Discreet Charm of Violence," etc., make it difficult to see this work as entirely scholarly. This perception is further empha-

sized by the author's reliance on newspapers, popular fiction and films as well as periodicals for her primary sources. Repeated references to Antoinette Giancana's *Mafia Princess* or Gay Talese's *Honor Thy Father* do little to identify this as a serious scholarly work.

This book is an impassioned indictment of the Mafia and of a state and its institutions that are often the Mafia's accomplices. It is also a paean to the courage of women and also of men—many of them employees of the State in various capacities—who dare or dared to oppose the hegemony of the Mafia. I found the most solid part of the book to be the last section which presents the reader with various forms of resistance to the Mafia and documents the rising consciousness of the victims' families and of Sicilians in general. The material in this section is well documented, drawing on trials, personal testimony collected by the Impastato Center, and press reports of various violent incidents. The first two sections I found to be weaker, focusing more on the author's personal reactions than on actual analysis. The book lacks an index,

which is irritating when one is trying to find something. Liz Heron's translation from the Italian is excellent, although the translation of *mamma* as *mum* I found annoying since in England the latter term has certain class connotations that the word *mamma* lacks. I also kept asking myself if the decision not to capitalize the word Mafia was a political one or whether it was an English convention (the book is translated for English rather than American audiences).

It was the author's intention in this book to combine subjective experience of the Mafia with a theoretical analysis. Thus the book is interwoven with her own subjective reactions and feelings about the events she documents. It is without a doubt stronger in this aspect than in its theoretical analysis.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sae>

**Citation:** Paola Sensi-Isolani. Review of Siebert, Renate, *Secrets of Life and Death: Women and the Mafia*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1449>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).