H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carina Gunnarson. *Cultural Warfare and Trust: Fighting the Mafia in Palermo (Perspectives on Democratic Practice).* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008. xv + 246 pp. $84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7672-5.

Roberto Saviano. *Gomorrah.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007. 301 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-16527-7.

Reviewed by Richard Drake
Published on H-Italy (December, 2008)
Commissioned by Dora M. Dumont

The South on Trial

The international success of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorrah*, an apocalyptic account of the Camorra, has focused attention sharply on the country's worsening problems with organized crime. Four major Mafia gangs plague the country: Cosa Nostra in Sicily, 'Ndrangheta in Calabria, the Sacra Corona Unita in Apulia, and the Camorra in Naples. Although each of the four is a distinct organization, their intersecting criminal activities have a cumulative effect in undermining the civic life of the country. Thanks to the constant attention that it receives in films and literature, Cosa Nostra has provided, according to Saviano, "the perfect media distraction for the Camorra, which has remained practically unknown" (p.154). The same might be said about 'Ndrangheta and Sacra Corona Unita. Since its original publication in 2006, *Gomorrah* has become an important point of comparison for subsequent work on the entire spectrum of the criminal underworld in Italy.

In the most general terms, Saviano's sensational book contained nothing new. The unification of the country in the mid-nineteenth century resulted in a growing awareness about the problems of the South. One of the most important aspects of the Southern Question, as identified and defined by the social commentators and critics who became known as the *meridionalisti*, concerned the region's problems with criminal gangs. According to Pasquale Villari, the liberal historian whose first and second series of "Southern Letters" in 1861 and 1875 launched *meridionalismo* as an intellectual movement, the South actually seemed to descend deeper into the swamp of criminality after the Risorgimento. A protean literature about the South's problems followed in the wake of Villari's newspaper articles, and continues today. *Gomorrah* is best understood as an update of the grim reports that began with Villari's revelations about the backwardness, ignorance, violence, and lawlessness of the Italian South. Saviano understands that his story about contemporary Naples possesses a deep historical dimension. He is an heir of Villari and the other pioneering *meridionalisti*, in describing "an identical historical trajectory, eternally the same. Perennial, tragic, ongoing" (p. 154).

Saviano's book deserves its fame. He is a resourceful reporter, a brilliant writer, and a thinker with original ideas. Following the example of film director and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini, who (in a front-page article for the *Corriere della Sera* entitled "I Know") famously denounced the Italian establishment of the 1970s, Saviano proclaims that "I Know the 'I Know' of my day" (p. 213). He does not make an idle boast. Deftly using images of sometimes shocking graphicness in describing scenes of extortion, torture, homicide, and the toxic degradation of the Neapolitan environment, he traces the demise of a once great and beautiful city, a victim not only of the traditional social and economic ills long ago identified and documented by the *meridionalisti*, but even more of a calamitous decline in the belief that the common good should be a concern any longer.

The moral voice of the book belongs to Don Peppino Diana, a priest who in his statements about the plague of the Camorra, achieved "a tone of despairing human dignity that made his words universal and allowed them to reach beyond the boundaries of religion" (p. 222). In *Gomorrah*, there can be found no more morally convincing antidote to the Nietzschean ethic by which the Neapolitan criminal clans live–"Ethics are the limit of the loser, the protection of the defeated, the moral justification for

those who haven't managed to gamble everything and win it all" (p. 112)–than the code of Christian social justice by which Don Peppino Diana lived and died. His impassioned arguments and pure eloquence posed a real danger to the clans, much as Archbishop Oscar Romero's did in El Salvador to the right-wing monsters who had him murdered. The same fate befell the anti-Camorra priest. Indeed, all of the individuals who challenge the Camorra, which constitutes the primary economic power of Naples, go down to defeat in this desolating book. As a rule, they do not live to fight another day.

By contrast, Carina Gunnarson's *Cultural Warfare and Trust: Fighting the Mafia in Palermo* gives the reader hope that, in Sicily anyway, organized crime might be losing its hold on society. If the South can be said to be on trial in these books, Saviano also is working for the prosecution, in the sense that he sees the crime-ridden status quo there as an insuperable obstacle to a decent society. It would be difficult to conceive of two writers more temperamentally at odds with each other than Gunnarson and Saviano. Gunnarson's primary target, however, is Robert Putnam whose 1993 book, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, confirmed and augmented such irredeemably pessimistic assessments of the South's prospects as Edward Banfield's "amoral familism" thesis in the 1958 classic, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society.*

Putnam claimed that the contemporary record of Italy's regional governments incontrovertibly showed how the failure and dissatisfaction rates for the South vastly exceeded those for the North. Some southern governments languished at Third World levels of inefficiency while a number of advanced governments in the North rivaled the most progressive regions of the postindustrial world. The tragedy of Italy today, in Putnam's account, lay in the wide and growing gap between North and South. Part of the reason for the South's inability to produce effective democratic institutions stemmed from longstanding socio-economic problems, but Putnam emphasized the signal importance of the region's enervating lack of civic virtue, which he argued, in the manner of Niccolo Machiavelli and Alexis de Tocqueville, constituted the key ingredient in the success or failure of free institutions. In communities that lack social capital, force and amoral familism serve as substitutes for the good society: "This equilibrium has been the tragic fate of southern Italy for more than a millennium" (p.178).[1] With the modern Italian government corrupt and unable to promote justice, the Mafia filled the vacuum and sealed the South's fate. Organized criminality evolved along with the region in a pattern of social mistrust that became coterminous with southern culture and social structure. Producing and selling trust to its individual clients, the modern Mafia successfully brought the practices of representative democracy into conformity with its traditional forms of exploitation and corruption.

In challenging Putnam's conclusions, Gunnarson devotes little attention to the Mafia

itself. Only in one chapter does she concern herself directly with Cosa Nostra. Her purpose in the book is not a Saviano-like exposé of criminal horrors. Instead, she wants "to analyze the effects of the anti-Mafia program on students' attitudes" (p. 49). She identifies the "Palermitan Renaissance," Mayor Leoluca Orlando's political program of the 1990s, as Palermo's civic education response to the Mafia killings of judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino early in that decade.

Did the anti-Mafia program in Sicily work? A comparison of Gunnarson with Saviano is particularly apt here. Naples also had a much-heralded renaissance of this kind at the same time, but Saviano only refers to it ironically. About a drug bust that resulted in fifty-three arrests, he writes: "They've all grown up in the Naples Renaissance, in the new political dimension of the 1990s, which was supposed to alter people's destiny" (p. 95). Absolutely nothing changed as a result of Mayor Antonio Bassolino's earnestly proclaimed crusade to restore the health of Naples, and the city remained in the headlines as the reeking garbage dump and murder capital of Europe.

Gunnarson, a researcher in the Department of Government at Uppsala University, tells a very different story about the Mafia in Palermo. She assesses the results of Palermo's anti-Mafia program by analyzing survey questionnaires filled out in 2002 and 2005 by 246 ten- to fourteen-year-olds and letters written by them about their impressions of such concepts as trust and civic engagement. The students came from rich, poor, and middle-income neighborhoods. She thinks that an important barometric reading of Palermo's civic health can be gained this way.

On the basis of the survey and letters, Gunnarson writes in a mood of hope and expectation for the future. Most encouragingly, the students have a deep and nearly uniform faith in the educational system. Therefore, what they learn in class stands an excellent chance of gaining acceptance by them. It follows that a proper emphasis on civic education will lead to the desired results in the cultural war against the Mafia. Trust can be enhanced by

state action: "openness of school structures, fairness of institutions, caring school environment and openness of the classroom climate all have positive and statistically significant effects on trust" (p. 152).

Putnam has it entirely wrong on his crucial point, according to Gunnarson: "Contrary to the civil society argument, our analysis shows that students are *less* inclined to trust others if they are active in voluntary associations" (p. 154). That the associations cited by her are for the most part junior high school sports teams should not cause de Tocqueville to turn over in his grave or Putnam to resign from Harvard in disgrace. For Gunnarson, though, the implications of her statistics are momentous. She concludes that "it may be possible to encourage the development of trust within a shorter time frame than Putnam suggests: trust may not need centuries to develop; it may take only two or three years" (pp. 156-157).

Despite his mixed overall political record, Mayor Orlando's institutional answer to the Mafia's territorial and mental control of the city's population appears to be working: "creating generalized trust between citizens therefore represents one way of undermining the Mafia's power" (p. 221). After mentioning that other efforts will have to be undertaken in many other fields besides a program of civic uplift in the schools, Gunnarson ends the book by noting, "But that is another story" (p. 221). Gunnarson's end point would be for Saviano and Villari the signal to begin a cross-checking investigation to determine if the schoolroom surveys and letters reflect anything important in the society as a whole and the actual conditions inside the Mafia. We can hope that Gunnarson will conduct such a follow-up investigation in a future book.

Note

[1]. Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993),

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Richard Drake. Review of Gunnarson, Carina, *Cultural Warfare and Trust: Fighting the Mafia in Palermo (Perspectives on Democratic Practice)* and Saviano, Roberto, *Gomorrah.* H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15592

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.