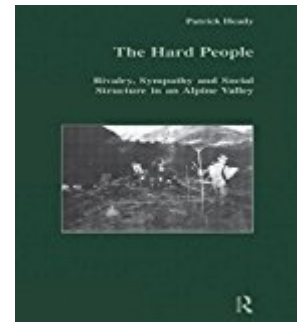


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Patrick Heady. *The Hard People: Rivalry, Sympathy and Social Structure in an Alpine Valley*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999. xiii + 248 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-5702-341-5.



Reviewed by Jaro Stacul (University of Cambridge)

Published on H-SAE (July, 2000)

In this thoroughly researched and documented book, Patrick Heady investigates contradictions of village life in northern Italy. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with older informants conducted in the Alpine area of Carnia, in the Friuli region of northeastern Italy, the book explores social and economic changes and how a post-peasant society responds to them. As the author states (p. 10), it focuses on the problem of "...how to reconcile the formal patterns discerned by ethnographers with the autonomy of the individual people in the communities they study," and of how to account for such patterns and of what relations they have to questions of practical action. This debate has had little impact on anthropological studies of Europe and, as the author points out, case studies on European rural communities have accounted for social action "...almost entirely in terms of economic motives and power relationships."

In addressing this issue, Heady engages in the investigation of a "classical" theme in Social Anthropology: the ways local-level ideas about solidarity, envy and strength relate to views about communication, boundaries, and natural forces. In fact, the ten chapters of the book centre on an old dilemma: the tension between the need for sympathetic fellowship, and the rivalry-generating desire to do better than other people.

The author starts with a detailed account of village

life and cooperation in the first two chapters, and then goes on to discuss the ways solidarity and cooperation can be disrupted. So, for example, the cooperative character of Carnian villages in the past and nowadays is revealed by the existence of property collectively owned by villages (meadows, cooperative dairies, etc.), by the amount of work villagers have to perform on behalf of the community, and by the deeply felt moral obligation to help each other. However, Heady points out that while cooperation and exchange suggest the existence of a "community of equals", in fact the idea of hierarchy (especially age hierarchy) looms large in village thinking, and disputes (about property, for example) are not rare. So, much of Chapter Three, "Rivalry and cohesion: envy, sympathy and divergent fortunes" is devoted to the analysis of the contrast between disruptive forces, such as envy and selfishness, and a desire for shared experience.

What is clear, from the very beginning of the book, is the picture of a social unit in which hierarchies are clear-cut, but in which an ideal "equilibrium" is reached through the moral obligation to cooperate and engage in various kinds of exchange, and through the symbolic breaching of boundaries. So, village unity is often enacted in the form of rituals through which the boundaries dividing the community are symbolically (or physically) crossed, as is the case of religious processions or the fire-

throwing ritual.

Chapter Four, "Communication, strength and boundaries" extends the analysis to the ways forces promoting and disrupting local solidarity are conveyed by communication: it focuses on the apparent contradiction between the idea of openness, expressed by cooperation and exchange, and closedness and hardness, which mainly manifest themselves in unwillingness to communicate, in aggressive behaviour or by stressing boundaries. "Hardness", in particular, "...the capacity to deploy physical and psychological strength in one's own interests", is considered central to Carnian self-definition, especially among men. In this chapter Heady points to a paradox: although strength and communication seem antithetical, in fact the former can be expressed by the ability to keep the latter in one's own domain (or family).

The examination of local-level views about strength is then expanded in Chapter Five in relation to the high value attached to ideas about property, work and sacrifice as assertions of strength. This information is discussed by comparison with the Christian values of poverty and renunciation which, although apparently opposed to ideas about strength, in fact seem to legitimate them. This, the author observes, raises the question of whether Christianity is truly hegemonic or whether the ideological system studied should be seen as a reconciliation of opposing values.

The phenomenon of village endogamy as functional to the social reproduction of the community is the main theme of the chapter "Marriage and village unity". Of particular interest is the examination of its ritual enactment, which takes the form of a fire-throwing ritual in which the young men of the village play the most important part, and serves to stress the image of a social system based on age-group solidarity. This ritual is interpreted as an expression of two ideas which inform much of local discourse: that of strength, as shown by the role played by the young, and that of exchange, as the ritual mainly represents a celebration of the exchange of women in marriage. The analysis of the concept of "strength" is concluded in the following chapter "Social relationship and nature symbolism" with a discussion of local-level views about natural forces, and about the relationship between human society and wild nature. Drawing on the practical and symbolic connections between social life and the natural world discussed elsewhere in the book, the author assesses the applicability of the nature/culture dichotomy to the social context studied, and argues that

the two are not conceptually opposed: rather, nature is considered permeated by social relationships that link it to human society.

The final three chapters illustrate the social and economic transformations of the last thirty to forty years, and focus on the ways local people cope with a changing situation to salvage a sense of community against the pressures threatening to obliterate local identity. So, in looking at the relationship between local identity and identification with larger units such as Carnia, the Friuli region, and the Italian nation-state, Heady seeks to question the idea that national or regional identity is largely an invention of politicians and urban lites. Rather, on the basis of the data so far discussed, he suggests that there is no simple distinction between a spontaneous sense of identity and one imposed by an external power. Autonomist parties achieve their appeal by drawing on ideas which inform local discourse, among which that of strength is seen as the most powerful. People's choices are affected by the way the values associated to a given authority correspond to those of the local community, and it is local "culture" that filters symbols and ideological messages emanating from regional, national and other centres.

What the book portrays is a social system characterised by its own set of values, in which social actors are caught between the desire for fellowship and that to do better than others. It is a system in which one group is gaining, while another one is losing, and in which ritual and symbolism serve to reconcile these contrasting attitudes through the fiction of exchange, or in the form of the symbolic breaching of boundaries. In stressing such a pattern, the author concludes that it is not simply European rural society that shares this characteristic, but that any society must have similar patterns in order to handle a tension such as that analysed.

The Hard People adds a new dimension to our understanding of rural communities in Europe. This is revealed by the approach of which the author avails himself, which enables him to combine and make sense of a wide range of ethnographic information, and establish connections between the social phenomena investigated in a way that is reminiscent of Herzfeld's study of a Cretan village.[1] In so doing, the author convincingly shows how views about strength, local boundaries, work or sociability may form part of a set of ideas through which nationalism becomes meaningful, even though the link between worldviews largely ascribed to a distant past and present-day nationalism is not always entirely clear. Fi-

nally, by linking local-level discourses to nationalism and nationalist ideologies, the book points to the contribution village studies can make to the understanding of political processes. I recommend it strongly.

Note

[1]. Herzfeld, Michael, *The Poetics of Manhood:*

Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Community. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985

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Citation: Jaro Stacul. Review of Heady, Patrick, *The Hard People: Rivalry, Sympathy and Social Structure in an Alpine Valley.* H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

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