



**Jane C. Schneider, Peter T. Schneider.** *Reversible Destiny: Mafia, Antimafia, and the Struggle for Palermo.* Berkley: University of California Press, 2003. 339 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-23609-7.



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### **J. C. Schneider u.a. (Hgg.): Reversible Destiny**

Jane and Peter Schneider, two American Anthropologists, have written an outstanding book, *Reversible Destiny. Mafia, Antimafia, and the Struggle for Palermo*, which deals with the social, political, and economic renaissance of Palermo since the Second World War. Palermo, once the *capital of the Mafia*, has of late become something of a success story, the *capital of the Antimafia* – which, the authors argues, can be attributed to the forces of civil society and the Antimafia-movement. Moreover, in Palermo the authors demonstrate the possibility of *reversible destiny* through an historical and contemporary analysis, which focuses on the dialectic between the development of the Mafia and the social movement of the Antimafia. In taking on the subject, this impressive report on the struggle for social power analyses the complex interrelatedness of clientelistic structures and behavioural strategies linked to endeavours for transparency and civil society.

In the first three of the twelve chapters of the book, the authors deal with the question whether Sicily is responsible for its own destiny. They describe the social disorder, which is generally blamed as being the cause for

the existence of the Mafia and for the vulnerability of the region. Then, in a parallel narrative, the authors describe the development of the Antimafia-movement. They paint a picture of a paradoxical and ambivalent culture, which they present in a kaleidoscopic manner. For this purpose, they sketch the tradition of organised crime since its beginnings in the 19th century, the deconstruction of the Mafia-myth, and the Mafia's involvement in political processes. The historical analysis ranges from feudalism, the times of the transition to capitalism, the beginnings of the nation-state, through to World War II and the Cold War. The genesis of the Mafia is counterbalanced by substantial social resources, which enable the growth of a civil society with democratic values, gender equality, the demand for transparent politics, and the refutation of clientelistic structures.

Using the notion of *reversibility* – a metaphor for a possible change of Sicilian society – Schneider and Schneider take aim at the body of anthropological literature which views the destiny of Sicily as one of cultural, social, political, and economic stagnation. This stagnation is often used in scientific and political explanations

of the underdevelopment of the Mezzogiorno. Moreover, Sicilians are generally viewed as being mafia-like, corrupt, criminal, stuck in clientelistic systems, and unable to create democratic and civil social structures. This is the picture of Sicily that the authors set out to deconstruct on the basis of their data, based on 20 years of research in Palermo. In annual short-term field stays they collected archival material, newspaper articles, expert literature, novels, journalistic texts, public speeches, and congresses. In addition, they recorded interviews with Antimafia-activists in politics, in the Catholic church, and in social work, and did participant observation at meetings of activists, at political events and so-called "Maxi-trials". I can agree with Fava's criticism only to a certain degree. He considers it a weakness of this study to be based on an eclectic collection of data from secondary sources in favour of the development of theories. He would have preferred an analysis of first-hand data, such as biographies of the individual informants, in order to elucidate the cultural background. While Fava appreciates the rich and diverse data and their originality, he also regards them as a limitation of the study, since they often conceal the line of the argument (Fava, Ferdinando. 2003. *Jane Schneider & Peter Schneider. Reversible Destiny. Mafia, Antimafia, and the Struggle for Palermo*, in: *Italian Politics & Society. The Review of the Conference Group on Italian Politics and Society* 58 (4), p. 42-45.

Chapters four and five then focus on the cultural production of violence by the Mafia and with the cultural understanding of Antimafia-activists. Jane and Peter Schneider offer an insight into the internal life of the Mafia by describing existing kinship and friendship codes and (initiation)-rites. They show that the foundation of Mafia-activities is tied to territory and clientelistic structures. Opposed to this is the cultural design of the Antimafia-activists, who consider clientelism as an obstacle to the attainment of civil society.

Chapters six and seven describe the "long 80s" the period from 1978 to 1992 with a detailed illustration of the Mafia-structure and the first activities of the Antimafia-movement. It is the time of "excellent cadavers": these are functionaries in societal top positions, who, through their violent deaths have become symbols of the brutal violence and anti-state attitudes of the Mafia. Such "excellent cadavers" took part in preparing and implementing the Maxi-trials, which took place between February 1986 and December 1987 – a period called the "spring of Palermo" under the tutelage of the first-term mayor Leoluca Orlando (1985 to 1990). It was during that time that the Antimafia-movement formed

among the educated middle class, who saw Orlando as their ideological backbone. The strategy implementing a civil society was based on the idea of cultural and political re-education, on the transmission of democratic values, and the establishment of social benefits.

Based on the double analysis of both the Mafia and the Antimafia-movement, the authors manage to explain the end of the "spring of Palermo". In chapter eight, they describe the transition from an enthusiasm for civil society among the Antimafia-activists to a period of exhaustion. The difficulties of the activists in establishing civil society demonstrated their own heterogeneity as well as their difficulties in conveying their ideas to lower social classes, for whom clientelistic behaviour represented part of a broader survival strategy.

The time after the murder of lawyers Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992, who were considered to be leading activists of the Antimafia-movement during the Maxi-trials, is the focus of chapter nine. Against the backdrop of the Sicilian and worldwide outcry after the killings, the Antimafia-activists managed to re-form and Orlando was re-elected as mayor in 1993 with 76% of the votes. During the following period, the Antimafia-activists worked at the grassroots for the establishment of civil society and tried to implement democratic values and political transparency in day-to-day practice.

In chapters ten and eleven, the authors turn to the restoration and conservation of urban spaces, whose ruins marked and continue to mark the image of the city. Furthermore, they describe the concrete cultural and political re-education of Mafia-children. The restoration of historical buildings in Palermo through funds from the European Union marked a turning point, as multifarious cultural "goods" became accessible to a whole population while social centres received financial support for implementing pedagogical programmes aimed at "re-educating" Mafia-children. Linked to that was the idea of a "new urban economy". The new civil society was supposed to manifest itself in architecture, culture, and education.

In the final chapter, entitled "reversible destiny", the authors return to the dialectic of the cultural destiny of Sicily and its reversal. They critically depict Palermo's societal transformation from the "capital of the Mafia" to the "capital of the Antimafia", and thus illustrate the invisible interface between criminal actors, Antimafia-activists, and the "common" population. The moral discourse centres on the question, where the Mafioso ends and where the impeccable citizen begins? One of the

most important lessons to be learned from the case of Palermo is, according to the authors, that the society as a whole and its cultural, economic, and historical roots in a global context have to all be taken into consideration when analysing social movements directed against organised crime.

The depiction of the struggle between the two poles of Mafia and Antimafia, the existence of clientelistic and transparent structures at the same time, is, from an anthropological perspective, well structured. The strict dichotomy, however, begs the question, whether aspects of civil society are not already inherent in small-scale social orders such as patterns of friendship, patronage, or godfatherhood in their clientelistic networks of relationships? Sicilian society is a Catholic society that legitimises the clientelistic system of godfatherhood and patronage in a religious way and revitalises it con-

stantly. Since the Schneiders focus mainly on intellectual and leftist clerics and classify patronage as so-called folk-religiosity, they veil the paradoxical link between Catholic Church and civil society. While the Church per se is part of civil society, it is neither transparent nor democratic because of its own understanding of its purpose. Here, a more detailed look at the links between the Catholic Church as a whole and the Antimafia-movement in their common goals and divergent forms of organisation would have been beneficial.

Overall, this is a profound and critically analysed history of the Mafia and the Antimafia-movement in Palermo. The book can be recommended for further studies as well as for introductory reading on the Mafia and Sicilian society in all of its paradoxical realities. It is an important marker in the ethnography of Sicily.

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