

Behaviour Codes in Sicily.

Bypassing the Law

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Abstract:

Focused on oral culture in western Sicily, this paper explores informal behaviour codes in their interaction with formal law. State-formation in Italy left people in peripheral areas to forge strategies of self-help and negotiate support from patrons (called “friends”). Ironically, the very networks of clientelism and their attendant behaviour codes further weakened the state’s control over its southern periphery and hindered its economic integration into the national and international economy – which in turn reinforced the impact of informal codes and practices on the working of formal law. The Sicilian case provides an example of the periphery as a locus of innovation.

Keywords: oral culture; friendship; patronage; self-help; periphery

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Introduction [1]

In the process of Italian state-formation, Sicily exhibits widening gaps between popular behaviour codes and the law. The architects of Italian unification realized the problems of integration when one of them famously warned, “*L’Italia è fatta. Restano a fare gli Italiani.*” [2]

With the unification of Italy in 1861, the new state imposed taxation and conscription, which alienated the working population and entrenched rural banditry in the south. Moreover, successive governments chose to administer the new periphery through indirect rule – a well-known colonial practice whereby local elites retained power. In Sicily’s western interior they were mostly absentee landowners with retinues of violent middlemen who controlled a large, poor and illiterate peasantry. With the extension of the suffrage and other democratic institutions, most notably political parties, patron-client networks, based on an informal exchange of “favours” involving basic goods and services, became the main social infrastructure. More than just a parallel structure alongside the state, “friendship”, the local term for patron-client relations, became a set of key practices pervading all state institutions, providing an entire vocabulary of standard expressions, aphorisms and proverbs that endorsed (instrumental) friendship ties and self-help. Political clientelism alienated Sicilians further from the state, which in turn weakened central control over the periphery. These developments put a premium on *abilità*, or self-help. Early German anthropologists and sociologists neatly captured the conditions of *Selbsthilfe*, saying it looms large whenever the individual threatens “*durch den Staat erstickt oder im Stich gelassen zu werden*” (Steinmetz 1931, 522). [3] This paper explores attendant Sicilian behaviour codes by focusing on the oral culture that developed around friendship, patronage and self-help.

The following collage of fragments shows how proverbs, aphorisms and standard expressions interact with power and the existential basis of everyday social action in a small agro-town (population ca. 2,500), situated in Sicily’s western interior about fifteen miles south-west of Corleone, where I did fieldwork for over two years in the 1960s and afterwards kept up with things by brief visits and occasional correspondence (Blok 1974; 2000). In this hilly and mountainous area of cereal-pasture holdings in Palermo’s southern hinterland, two main features stand out: the peasant population lives concentrated in agro-towns, often strategically located on hill-tops and ranging between about 3,000 and 60,000 in population, leaving a desolate and insecure countryside of *latifondi*, or large landed estates, whose owners mostly reside in Palermo as *rentiers*. Ironically, the depopulation of the countryside (as a consequence of agglomeration of peasants in agro-towns) and semi-nomadic sheep-

[1] For comments and editorial advice I am most grateful to Rod Aya.

[2] “We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians.” The one-liner appears in the memoirs of Marquis d’Azeglio (1798-1866), one of the state-makers alongside Cavour. Both were from Turin, Piedmont.

[3] The play on words is lost in translation: “to be suppressed or abandoned by the State.”

farming facilitated one of Sicily's major "industries": *abigeato*, or large-scale livestock theft, and clandestine transport of animals to city markets; hence the area's denomination as a "brigand corridor" (Fentress 2000, 132; Schneider & Schneider 2003:24-25, 30-32). Agricultural techniques and sheep-farming practices go back to Greek and Roman antiquity; a poor network of roads connects the area to the port of Palermo for its export of grain, meat and cheese (Mack Smith 1968, 445ff., 1969, 36ff.; Blok 1974,17-84; Ryder 1983,721-22); and Parra (1997). [4]

Saying as doing something

Often metaphorical, the sayings recorded here are part of a popular vocabulary of behaviour codes or precepts underlying corresponding practices also common in other parts of Sicily, most notably in and around Palermo and its hinterland. Because most of the sayings are utterances that prescribe conduct and influence it in special ways (commending, condoning, warning, inspiring, apologizing, encouraging, endorsing, praising and persuading), the maxims are not merely descriptive statements that refer to some state of affairs or state some fact. They are "speech acts", also called "performatives": by *saying* something they are also *doing* something. As Austin puts it, "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as 'just', saying something" (1992, 2-5, 148-64). Obvious examples include standard utterances spoken at weddings and baptisms and verbal formulae at initiation rituals, where formulaic oath taking is the central feature of these ceremonies (La Fontaine 1985, 58ff.). The same goes for insulting (offending), a speech act that hurts, harms and both literally and figuratively puts a person down: injures someone's reputation or honour. As is well known, "adding insult to injury" may trigger a violent response. Also remember that metaphors are pervasive in everyday life, not only in language but also in thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Finally, we should remember that the distinction between code and practice is analytical: it would be difficult to understand one without the other.

Fatto la legge, nasce l'inganno. "When the law is made, deceit is born." A striking example is the evasion of the post-war agrarian reform law. Issued in 1946, the law required the expropriation of properties larger than 200 hectares held in extensively cultivated cereal-pasture fields and the subsequent allocation of small lots and new, adjacent homes to landless peasant families. It was not before the autumn of 1952 that the reform took shape in the town's large territory of just over 13,000 hectares. Three estates, mostly of poor quality, were expropriated and assigned in lots to the new settlers in four distant hamlets. The long delays enabled estate owners to bypass the law: they sold

[4] Compare Lampedusa's description of the panoramic view of the area from the public garden of Santa Margherita di Belice around 1905 he recalls in *Places of My Infancy* (1962, 251): "Opposite stretched a vast range of low mountains, all yellow from reaping, with blackish patches of burnt stubble. [...] On its flanks could just be made out villages whose grayish-yellow stone was scarcely distinguishable from the background: Poggioreale, Contessa, Salaparuta, Gibellina, Santa Ninfa, all weathering in poverty and dog-days, and in an ignorance against which they never reacted with the very faintest of flickers."

large parts of their estates to their former leaseholders and divided other parts among future heirs. In the early 1960s, most houses in the hamlets had been abandoned and their inhabitants had migrated to industrial areas in northern Italy, Switzerland and Germany (Blok 1966; 1974, 190-210). The poor results of the land reform in this part of the island were by no means exceptional, as appears from critical surveys of the reform in Sicily as a whole (Rocheftort 1961, 109-17; Diem 1963).

The expression “*Fatto la legge, nasce l’inganno*” is more than just a statement of fact. Depending on context, it also describes a process (law-making) and obliquely condones, even endorses the practice of ignoring and bypassing formal legislation. Yet the expression also occurs as a statement of fact with overtones of regret and acquiescence. This happened, for example, in July 1966 when I accompanied two surveyors for the land registry, who invited me along while they were working on measuring and checking property borders of former *latifondi*. (I provided transport between the village and outlying fields.) They found no traces of the new borders that were supposed to be present according to the divisions reported in the *catasto*, or land registry – clearly a case of make-believe division to evade expropriation as prescribed in the agrarian reform law. As one of the land surveyors acknowledged in a comment: “*L’inganno viene dopo la legge*” (Deceit follows the law). [5]

Governo ladro. “The government steals.” The state imposes taxes and conscription, gives nothing in return, fails to build and maintain roads. Following Italian unification, the introduction of obligatory formal education was also seen as an imposition, because attending school withdrew children from the family’s labour force. As a consequence, illiteracy rates remained high far into the twentieth century while the lack of roads, especially in the inland areas, remained a perennial problem. Prospective conscripts fled to the mountains and formed armed bands, making banditry endemic in large parts of southern Italy for decades after unification. At the time, the army fought pitched battles with assorted robber bands at the cost of human life on both sides and the loss of natural resources as forests were cut down or set on fire to combat outlawry (Mack Smith 1968, 445-79).

Distrust discouraged cooperation with authorities and promoted reliance on informal relationships, including kinship, friendship and patronage, with their attendant behaviour codes that emphasized respect, loyalty, reciprocity and solidarity. In turn, self-help and patronage helped undermine government intervention: one became a condition of the other. In this case, too, the expression “*Governo ladro*” is more than a statement or a negative qualification. It also discourages trust in state authorities and invites non-cooperation. One of the most cited commonplaces about Sicily’s history used to explain and justify the prevalent distrust towards public authority – and vindicate the practice

[5] One of the estates measured 141 hectares and, according to the land registry, should have been divided among future heirs (to avoid expropriation) into four shares of respectively 54, 13, 29, and 45 hectares.

of self-help – is the statement that the island had a long history of foreign domination, going back more than 2,500 years: since antiquity, Sicily has been governed, dominated, and exploited by foreign powers, including Greek, Phoenician, Roman, Arab, French, Swabian, Spanish and British. A more recent variation specifies the issue: “Every regime that governed southern Italy from the Norman establishment of a centralized monarchy in the twelfth century to the unified government which took over there in 1861 was foreign and governed with a logic of colonial exploitation” (Tarrow 1996, 394). But the use of the native concept “*governo ladro*” obscures the reciprocal relation of condition and effect: state intervention remains abortive as a result of the very practices of patronage, friendship, and self-help. Sicilians remain caught in a vicious circle of clientelistic politics and economic stagnation. As two observers put it: “What clients ask from their patrons is not economic development but personal material advantages. [...] Clientelism entails not just the exchange of material favors for votes, but also the exchange of those products of the public administration (permits, licences, authorizations), which do not cost patrons money, but have a significant economic impact on the clients. [...] Highways may be built not because of their potential effect on economic growth, but because their construction creates numerous occasions for clientelistic exchanges” (Chubb 1982, 3-5; Piattoni 1998, 233-34).

The following proverbs build on the same set of informal behaviour codes and practices and underscore the form of patronage that celebrates dyadic coalitions and precludes cooperation between clients. The saying **Senza amici non si va in paradiso** (“Without friends, one does not go to paradise”) refers to the belief in saints and their help but also states a fact and recommends a corresponding practice: networking. Secular patrons (“friends”) and patron saints serve as models of and for one another showing up in behaviour codes that emphasize submission, veneration, loyalty, esteem, admiration, political support and protection (Boissevain 1966; Wolf 2001b, 1966, 86-87; Christian 1972, 177-78; Piattoni 1998). Comparative research indicates that patronage was perhaps the most pervasive institution of pre-industrial society (Westfall 1985, 29-30). Yet patron-client relations take different forms under different circumstances, also in southern Italy itself, where “vicious clientelism” in Sicily contrasts with “virtuous clientelism” in mainland Abruzzo (Piattoni 1998, 234-39). In the former case it builds on competing, agonistic clients (dyadic relationship); in the latter case it builds on the cooperation between clients and has a strong civic element (polyadic relationship) (cf. Wolf 1966, 84-86).

Una mano lava l'altra e tutte due lavano la faccia (“One hand washes the other and both wash the face”) draws on the imagery of the human body. This informal behaviour code defines and

governs everyday thought and practice. As a strategy for both self-help and clientelism, the saying proclaims and recommends reciprocity, an exchange relation between present and future friends: descriptive, explanatory, and prescriptive – a speech act that also implies and recommends reservation and secrecy. Other maxims convey the same message, e.g., **Tutto si svolge tramite amicizia**. (“Everything is done through friendship”). Like previous aphorisms about the ubiquity of instrumental and lopsided friendship and its selective adaptation, the expression is both descriptive and prescriptive (as a strategy), **Tramite un uomo si fa un altro uomo** (“By means of a man one makes another man”), and **Ci vuole amicizia; senza amicizia non si conclude niente** (“One needs friends; without friends one cannot accomplish anything”).

Next we have a highly metaphoric popular saying expressing disdain for state institutions and endorsing self-help. It recalls Bakhtin’s work on the rich comic imagery of the bodily element in grotesque realism of popular culture that prevailed in late medieval and early modern Europe. **Cu avi denari e amicizia si tene in culo la giustizia. (Chi ha denaro ed amicizia va nel culo della giustizia)** (“Anyone who has money and friends screws justice in the arse.”) An early observer remarked that this proverb, “repeated every day by thousands of mouths and reinforced by facts, has been elevated to dogma” (Coci 1905, 132). [6] If a person is accused of a serious crime or involved in a lawsuit his patron will protect him against exactions from authorities – an essential task of patrons. Patrons provide a lawyer or have the case delayed or withdrawn; witnesses can be bribed to retract accusations, recant early statements or not to testify in court. When the defendant is released for lack of evidence (*prosciolto per mancanza di prove*), the result and the protection from above will enhance his prestige and justify, even reinforce, popular behaviour codes that endorse bypassing the law (cf. Schneider/Schneider 2003, 33).

An example from the area where I worked exhibits the widely accepted practice of protection against exactions from the law in Sicily shortly after unification – almost espousing it openly. When Marco Minghetti was prime minister of Italy (1873-1876) [7] he visited the small town of Camporeale, also situated in the western reaches of the “bandit corridor.” The local priest introduced himself to him as follows:

Priest: “I commend to you a poor young man who needs your protection.”

Minghetti: “And why? What does he want?”

Priest: “Nothing, he only met with an accident, he has killed a man.” [8]

[6] In his encyclopedic and widely praised work on Sicilian customs and popular traditions, including five volumes on Sicilian proverbs, Giuseppe Pitre (1841-1914), a prudish Victorian gentleman, omits any reference to the rich and comic imagery of the grotesque human body in Sicilian popular culture, thus falsifying the ethnographic record.

[7] Born in Bologna in 1818; economist, intellectual, cosmopolitan, statesman: with Cavour one of the architects of Italian unification.

[8] Cited in Alongi (1891, 50). French original; my translation.

This exchange between the highest authority of the state and a local authority steeped in local culture, using the word *poveretto* [9] for a man who from the point of view of formal law was a criminal, involves a switching of codes still current today in the expressions and sayings people use after learning about an ugly murder: “*Siddu l’ammazzaru, qualchi cosa brutu l’avia fattu.*” “If he is killed [in this way], he must have done something bad.” Also: “*Mischinu chiddu chi l’ammazzau.*” “Poor guy who killed him.” According to Sicilian cultural logic, those who kill always have a reason or motive to kill – “otherwise they would not kill”, which comes down to the principle of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. This form of (negative) reciprocity goes back to Roman law, which “operated on the *lex talionis*, the principle of equivalent vengeance (*par vindicta*)” (Barton 1993, 180). [10] After having settled his own affairs through self-help, the killer needs protection against state authorities (who are believed not to understand local customs, conditions, and circumstances). It would be missing the native point of view and ignoring the wider context of weak central control over the means of violence to suggest that we are dealing with a case of “taking the law into one’s own hands” and “blaming the victim”.

Two different systems of behaviour codes interact: formal state law, which defines murder as a serious crime, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, local, popular, or “customary” law, which operates on the principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. This form of self-help is adamant. [11] Failing retribution invites further afflictions and violations of persons and property.

As one informant added: when a murder became known, the women cried “*Mischinu*” (poor guy, unfortunate person), referring to the victim, while the men answered “*Mischinu è colui che lo ha ucciso*” (unfortunate is the one who has killed him). The gender difference in the perception of a killing corresponds to the division of labour and rigid segregation between the sexes that long prevailed in Mediterranean areas: men kill and identify with the killer; women take care of the dead – they wail, mourn, pray, bury the dead and visit graves.

The dark side of friendship

Patrons are called “friends,” but not all friends are patrons. It helps to understand patron/client ties as lopsided friendship – that is, as an asymmetric relationship. The following expressions reflect the ambiguities of friendship and its dangers. They refer to friends in symmetric relations and reveal the dark side of friendship. Behaviour code: be on your guard, in particular with your friends. The sayings confirm the stereotype of Sicilians as secretive people.

[9] *Poveretto*: “poor” or “unfortunate” person.

[10] “The Romans, unlike ourselves, were deeply accustomed to thinking in terms of homeopathic systems. ‘Like things are cured by like’ (*similia similibus curantur*). This was true not only in sorcery and medicine, but also in religion and law” (Barton 1993, 180).

[11] Compare Pigiariu’s study of Sardinian banditry, subtitled “*La vendetta barbaricina come ordinamento giuridico*” (1975).

Amicizia con tutti, confidenza a nessuno. “Friendship with everybody, trust nobody.” At first, when I was warned in this fashion, the expression confused me because, coming from another society and ignoring the rich evidence in both Shakespeare and the Bible, I naively considered trust to be the quintessence of friendship. But I soon learned that Sicily was different, also in its most celebrated social institution. For one thing, friends know much about you and do not arouse immediate suspicion. For the same reason they may be the ones to (be asked to) turn against you. Ironically and tellingly, this also happens among “friends-of-friends,” or mafiosi. Intra-mafia killings – especially during the two so-called mafia wars in the early 1960s and the period between the late 1970s and early 1990s – surpass homicides involving outsiders, and most of them were executed under the veil of friendship and hospitality, including betrayals within betrayals (Stille 1995; Lodato 2004). The following proverb has the same purport.

Dagli amici mi guarda Iddio (“God protect me from my friends”), implying I can take care of my enemies myself. The Scottish writer and naturalist Gavin Maxwell wrote a book based on his research in western Sicily in the early 1950s entitled *God Protect Me from My Friends*. This biography deals with the short life of the (political) bandit Salvatore Giuliano, who operated in western Sicily between 1944 and 1950 with his band on the side of the separatist movement. After this movement folded, Giuliano briefly supported the Christian Democratic Party and carried out attacks against left-wing union leaders and their local offices. After the Christian Democrats won the elections in the spring of 1948, Giuliano had outlived his usefulness for politicians and was betrayed by his closest ally, his cousin Gaspare Pisciotta. His liquidation is an example of protection that ran out. The order came from high-ranking politicians using their mafia contacts in the area to get rid of Giuliano, who, increasingly acting on his own, had become a nuisance. Later Pisciotta was poisoned and died in prison shortly before he was to testify in court and reveal the names of his principals (Maxwell 1957; Dickie 2004, 260-66). [12]

Tommaso Buscetta, a major figure in the mafia of Palermo in the 1950s and 1960s, who later moved to South America, referred to the ambiguities of friendship in an interview when detained as a *pentito* (collaborator) in the late 1980s and early 1990s: “*L’uomo che ti sta accanto ti può portare a una festa come alla tua tomba. L’amico più caro può essere il tuo assassino*” (“The man who stands beside you may take you as easily to a party as to your grave. The dearest friend may become your murderer”) (Arlacchi 1994, 155).

[12] See also the film *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962) Francesco Rosi, made on location mostly with local people, including some former members of Giuliano’s band.

Per conoscere una persona come amico, ci vuole tanti chili di sale. “To know for sure that a person is your friend, one should [eat] many kilos of salt [with him].” The saying indicates sharing many meals. **La mano è venuta di dentro o di fuori?** “Did the hand come from inside or from outside?” Metaphor: was the animal rustling an inside job? Recall Conan Doyle’s *Silver Blaze*, about the theft of a racehorse and the dog that did not bark, indicating, as Sherlock Holmes soon detected, that the offender must have been one of the employees. In Sicily it is widely believed that cattle and sheep rustlers are usually insiders, or “people who are familiar with the setting and know how to deal with animals” – a standard comment I heard only a few years ago during an occasional visit when a flock of sheep had been stolen from an outlying farm. **Sono dentro chi tagliano il bosco.** “They are inside who chop down the forest.” This expression has the same meaning as the previous one.

Omertà and other informal prescriptions

Cu è surdu, orbu e tace, campa cent’anni ’mpaci (Pitrè 1978, III, 215-34). “Anyone who is deaf, blind and does not talk will live a hundred years in peace.” This widely used proverb neatly captures the behaviour code of *omertà* and refers to a propensity, a *habitus* of reserve, secrecy and reticence – as Buscetta puts it, “*una cultura di tipo ‘omertoso’*” (Arlacchi 1994, 84). Because the saying recommends a behaviour code that promises a clear selective advantage, it has all the trappings of a speech act, going beyond a mere statement of fact.

Ai visto i buoi? Ne ieri ne oi. “Have you seen the oxen? No, neither yesterday, nor today.” The maxim illustrates *omertà*: do not talk; do not mention what you may have seen by chance. Do not answer questions. When people insist, just say “*Un sacciu*” (“I do not know”).

To deal with the ambiguities and dilemmas of friendship, people follow a set of behaviour codes that emphasizes *abilità*, the ability of self-help and social skills, which is part of the *omertà* complex. *Fare i fatti suoi*, minding one’s own business is a greatly and widely respected life-style close to the notion of manliness. It links up with the concept of *omertà* (from *omu*, *uomo*, man) – to be a man, or *uomo in gamba*, a firm, reliable person, who is also *furbo*, smart, astute, vigilant and inventive, recalling the *mêtis* of the ancient Greeks, of whom Odysseus is perhaps the best-known example (Detienne and Vernant 1974, 30-31, 218ff.).

All these elements of self-help, social skills and networking, are adaptive in an insecure world of weak central control and little social cohesion beyond the family (*meo sangue*, my blood), where patronage is not a system at all but a set of inherently unstable dyadic relations: voluntary on both

sides and subject to disintegration. In its Sicilian variety, where clients cannot act in concert, patrons preserve their power “even in the face of systematic breaches of the patron-client contract” (Piattoni 1998, 233).

The common practice of exchanging favours (*un scambio di favori*), which comes down to what anthropologists call “generalized” reciprocity, can easily derail, especially in symmetrical relations between friends. A perceived sense of growing disparity in the relationship may suffice to trigger a lethal conflict. More important than disagreement about the exchange of goods or services is the lack of respect or deference shown in an unfair deal. The extreme cases are most interesting. They delineate key informal behaviour codes. Precisely because the mafia professes an ideology of equality (reflected in its denominations *Cosa Nostra*, brotherhood, and friends-of-friends) and lacks institutionalized leadership and hierarchy (Paoli 2003, 62-64), lethal conflict lurks behind every move and deal (cf. Blok 1997; Gould 2002).

Proclaiming intimate friendship may imply a lethal threat. This is what Salvatore Riina, the elusive and long undisputed leader of the *Corleonesi* and *capo di tutti capi* until he was arrested in January 1993, allegedly said in the company of close friends about his chauffeur, Balduccio Di Maggio, who was also present on the occasion: “*Balduccio ce l’ho nel cuore*” (I have Balduccio in my heart). **[13]** This is a standard expression. What did Riina mean by this phrase? Di Maggio was his driver and knew a great deal about Riina’s daily routines, his dense network of accomplices, as well as the place where he was hiding from the law – information that could be also used against his boss. Hence Riina’s warning in an opaque declaration of intimate friendship, hinting at terrible sanctions if loyalty gave way to betrayal. Paraphrasing Freud on the quintessence of jokes, Riina actually said what he had to say by not saying it. Oblique phrases are common in Sicilian discourse. They are part of informal behaviour codes that emphasize secrecy: what is said can be interpreted in several ways. Hence one finds a language eloquent in metaphor, synecdoche and other tropes, supported and interspersed by an equally rich vocabulary of subtle gesture and mimicry.

Later, in a Piedmont prison for a minor offence, Di Maggio would indeed betray Riina after he heard about the state’s reward for the capture of his former boss. Transported to Palermo, he turned *pentito* and provided information about the whereabouts of Riina. A few days later, in the early morning of 15 January 1993, Di Maggio pointed Riina out from a police car that was following the flow of morning traffic in the city along the road the ex-driver knew so well. Yet this betrayal may have been a cover for another betrayal involving a deal between Riina’s colleague, rival and future successor, Bernardo

[13] The popular expression “*capo di tutti capi*” contradicts the segmented structure of Sicilian Mafia. Riina forged powerful coalitions and action-sets, but never had full control over all local mafia leaders. His power domain crumbled when his closest allies turned against him.

Provenzano [14], and the police to get rid of Riina, who had indulged in ultra anti-state violence for well over a decade and had become an embarrassment to both the state and *Cosa Nostra*. Riina's demise and Provenzano's succession would open the way to *normalizzazione* and the *pax mafiosa* (Jamieson 2000, 232-34; Lodato and Travaglio 2005, 341-58). These informal interactions between representatives of the state and *Cosa Nostra*, also known as *intreccio* – a dense interweaving with the state, show the extent to which informal behaviour codes supplemented formal law – and, in this case, even supplanted it. [15] Remember that all organizations operate on normative rules and have pragmatic rules for what must be kept under cover – and what everyone is likely to know or surmise anyway (Bailey 1969, 121ff.).

In the summer of 1966, a shepherd told me about the theft of his flock of sheep some years before. He had to report the theft to local *carabinieri* (police) and went with them in a car to look for the sheep in the vast hinterland of Palermo. After they stopped at several flocks that appeared not to be his, they came to another group of sheep and he was asked again if the animals belonged to him. The shepherd recognized them immediately but denied they were his. Asked why he did not to tell the *carabinieri* the truth, he said it was all a formality. Eventually he got some of his sheep back through “friends”, who kept a number “for the trouble” (cf. Paoli 2003, 160-61). The shepherd was “respected” for not violating the code of *omertà*: never provide information to authorities and by implication never provide information to anyone or ask questions – behaviour codes that are adaptive strategies in an insecure world where people believe and insist that those who are “blind, deaf, and silent, live a hundred years.” As mentioned above, understanding the industry of animal rustling (*abigeato*) requires recognition of social, geographical and ecological constraints. In a desolate countryside of cereal-pasture holdings stretching out over a hilly and mountainous area, semi-nomadic shepherds need friends to help them find pastures and protection the state cannot provide. These conditions force them to adopt behaviour codes that stress self-help, networking and a reputation for violence. This also helps explain why so many mafiosi in Sicily's western interior have a pastoral background (Schneider and Schneider 1976, 65-66, 178-79).

Bisogno pensare al vivo

During a recent visit to the little town in Sicily I heard about an incident that illustrates how informal behaviour codes still interact with formal law and hold the upper hand.

[14] Before he was arrested in April 2006, Provenzano had been equally elusive and for more than four decades a *latitante* (fugitive from the law).

[15] On *intreccio*, see the perceptive remarks of Schneider & Schneider (2003, 32).

On a Sunday in August only a few years ago, a religious celebration – the confirmation of three children – took place in the local church that morning, followed later in the afternoon by a dinner in a nearby restaurant in the countryside, to which many guests had been invited, including family and in-laws. According to custom, the guests received a small ritual present (a silver spoon and almonds). As the party drew to an end, one of the guests, the brother-in-law of the host, turned to the latter and asked him why not all guests had received this present, only heads of families – a grave offence. It questioned the host's hospitality as well as the norms of reciprocity between kinsmen and provoked a fight in which the brother-in-law's sons badly hurt the host, who had to be taken to hospital by his sons. On the way in their car, they noticed he was dead. They rushed back to the restaurant and beat up their uncle, who also died. Later there was an investigation. Yet of more than one hundred guests "nobody had seen anything." On a single afternoon, a woman lost both husband and brother. Further investigations resulted in an official statement that read "death from natural causes", respectively from a heart attack and a stroke. Indeed, both victims were elderly and one of them was *sofferente*, infirm.

It appears that kinsmen, mediators and authorities acted according to an informal behaviour code summarized in the popular saying, "*Bisogno pensare al vivo!*" Moreover, criminal prosecution for manslaughter would have harmed both parties, who were in-laws. The verb "*pensare*" has various meanings: to think, reflect, mind, but also to consider, to take care of, to provide for – as in the common saying "*Ci penso io*" (I take care of it). Considering context and situation, "*bisogno pensare al vivo*" may then be rendered, "One must provide for the living." As in the similar case of the local priest who recommended protection for an "unfortunate" youngster who had killed a man (see above), identification shifts from victim to offender.

I had first heard the expression "*Bisogna pensare al vivo*" as a comment on another case of manslaughter, which took place toward the end of my fieldwork in 1967. Following a dispute between a shopkeeper and a customer, an obese, elderly, retired policeman, the latter was pushed from the steps leading to the shop and died soon afterwards. The elderly women bewailed the fate of the victim. Aware of my interest in local customs, one of my friends, a lawyer, turned to me while we were standing at the post office listening to what people had to say about the victim and, referring to the shopkeeper in jail awaiting trial, remarked, "*Bisogna pensare al vivo.*" He had good reason to say so, because the victim's family was believed to insist on severe retribution – not least because of the victim's former employment as a *carabiniere* and his connections. The shopkeeper had a working-class background and a reputation for being touchy. He had worked for many years as a migrant labourer in Switzerland

and invested his earnings in the shop. He was another “unfortunate” and had few if any people to speak up for him. Hence the speech-act of recommendation from the lawyer.

Conclusion

This brief excursus on (informal) behaviour codes and their interaction with formal law in western Sicily leaves us with the question of what Sicilian experience can tell us about the working of similar codes in other societies. The Sicilian case shows that we cannot understand these codes without considering their relationship with everyday practices and that both should be understood in the context of wider political and cultural settings. State-formation in Italy left people in its peripheral areas to fend for themselves, that is, to forge strategies of self-help and negotiate support from patrons, called “friends”, able to mediate between centre and periphery. Informal exchange relations between patrons and clients extended from the local level to the centres of power at regional and national levels. Ironically, the very networks of clientelism and their attendant behaviour codes further weakened the state’s formal control in its peripheries, which in turn reinforced reliance on informal behaviour codes and practices. Yet for all its dark sides, the Sicilian case also provides us with an intriguing example of “the periphery as a locus of innovation“ (Lattimore 1980). The present discussion questions the long prevailing but recently criticized view of “the periphery as a non-center, representing it as an area of shadow which serves to bring out the radiance of the metropolis” (Burke 2005, 87). In their interaction with powerful centres, over the past 150 years ruthless Sicilian middlemen succeeded in extending their control over what Wolf in an early paper calls “the critical junctions or synapses of relationships that connect the local system to the larger whole” (Wolf 2001a, 138). Interacting with state representatives and drawing on feudal custom, Sicilian middlemen forged informal codes and practices, some of which this paper tries to indicate. They had an impact on Italian society and politics at large, most ominously in collusion and contiguity with the mafia.

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