FOREWORD

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Berardino Palumbo is unquestionably one of the leading anthropologists of Italy. Over many years of ethnographic research and publication, he has developed a distinctive blend of theory, method, and what is best described as artfully epistemic rhetoric. In this translation and adaptation of some of his work, centered on his book on the "bowing saints"—saints who show public respect to known *mafiosi*—we hope to offer an English-speaking readership some of the rich insights that his work represents. Those insights here take an accessible form that entails explaining an alternative modernity, one that has been caricatured in the public imagination without much understanding of its logic and modes of expression. In so doing, we hope also to introduce to our readers important work that has too long remained in the international shadows thanks to the domination of the English language.

This book is something of a composite—a combination of translation (the dominant part) and edited reframing. One of the astonishing dimensions of translation from Italian to English is how the text shrinks, a bit like what happens to spinach when it is cooked. Like spinach, moreover, the text becomes more digestible to those whose linguistic habits tend to the terseness of English rather than the rhetorical elaboration of Italian. Such differences are not absolute and shift over time. They are nevertheless real, as a comparison of this text with its original components would quickly reveal. Translation and editing are thus not simply a matter of transferring ideas from one language to another. They are also exercises in what is special in ways that will transcend these stylistic differences. That is what we have tried to do, in direct consultation with the author, with this highly original set of anthropological insights grounded in many years of immersive ethnography.

Like many Italian anthropologists, Palumbo draws frequently on the writings of Antonio Gramsci as well as, though to a lesser extent, of Ernesto

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De Martino. He is also thoroughly conversant with the "Anglo-Saxon" anthropological traditions and has been able to meld these different traditions in a new synthesis. That alone should commend the present volume to readers. But what makes this book particularly original lies in Palumbo's ability to use his ethnographic data not as the basis of a traditional controlled comparison or even as a way of simply highlighting commonalities across cultural divides, but to push back against facile representations of regional or national culture. In the process, he avoids and delegitimizes the essentializing terms to which even anthropologists—who are professional critics of essentialism—often seem tempted to resort when talking about mafia and similar phenomena.

In this presentation of Palumbo's anthropology, the goal has been to highlight, as clearly as possible, his unique combination of long-term ethnographic research, critical comparison, and sensitivity to historical process. His argument is at one level so blindingly simple as to elude comprehension. He argues that the peculiar practices associated with death, violence, ritual, and masculinity, all of which have long been seen as essential to the concept of *mafia*, actually both predate the emergence of that moral universe and yet also equip it with a distinctive modernity that challenges the bureaucratic modernities of church and state. Because we have all become accustomed to media representations of "the mafia" as a combination of retrograde violence and sophisticated and organizationally adept criminality, Palumbo's nuanced reading of mafia as concept and lifeworld may not immediately seem to make sense. The evidence he produces and his relentless refusal to reproduce the neat dualities of conventional thinking on the subject, however, together force the attentive reader to face the complexity that mafia actually represents.

It is not an easy task even in Italian. In that language, Palumbo's predilection for repeating points—a style that recalls Giambattista Vico's use of rhetorical flourishes as a kind of conceptual indexing device in the *New Science* (1744)—constantly pulls the reader away from dualistic readings. He does this by repeating the dualities and then showing that they fail to account for the events to which they are conventionally applied. The tactic does eventually work, and, for an audience accustomed to this particular rhetorical mode, it drives an argument from which, once it is understood, there is no turning back.

In this English-language reworking of Palumbo's ideas—some parts of which he originally penned in English himself—we have endeavored to "preserve the flavor of the original" (as the saying goes) while, at the same time, selectively focusing the reader's attention on what, at the core, is actually a very taut, disciplined line of argument. Palumbo is perhaps more concerned to show what we should *not* assume about mafia (or about "the mafia"[1]).

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We should not, above all, assume that the violence and aggressive masculinity so often encountered in Sicilian life necessarily means that those who act in this way are *mafiosi*. As the Schneiders' amusingly anecdotal Afterword shows, such ambiguity is pervasive, as is the sense that the masculinist morality and rhetoric blur potentially invidious distinctions between those who are unquestionably mafiosi and those who might not be.

Such ambiguity (or protective coloring) allows mafiosi to draw on long-standing cultural habits of social interaction to construct their own management of contemporary life—their own modernity. They do so in more or less conscious opposition to, and interaction with, the institutions of church and state.

Palumbo shows us, conversely, how church and state insist on their own interpretations of modernity. Theirs is a modernity predicated on predictability. Here I would interject a thought that does not stem directly from Palumbo's own commentary: that anthropology—which, as the methodologically least predictable of all the social sciences, is also arguably the social science that most respects the agency of its local interlocutors—is well equipped to understand how this unbureaucratic modernity operates. That, indeed, is what Palumbo achieves. He shows that the difficulty of pinning down the exact relations among medical technology, power, and curious ritual practices (such as, centrally, that of the bowing saints) is the consequence of a peculiarly local set of circumstances. Sicilian modernity is not European, Italian, or even Roman modernity.[2] It is a *sui generis* modernity—as, Palumbo hints, are all modernities—and it should be treated on its own terms. The peculiar patterning of social life that this modernity entails would not work in a different cultural context. It works stunningly well—if dangerously—in this one. And it is identifiable because the ethnographer has not allowed himself to assume that it would exhibit a predictability analogous to that of familiar official and ecclesiastical forms.

Palumbo's life work is, in important respects, precisely the pursuit of this recognition. To those who criticize anthropology for being too inclined to focus on uniquely local phenomena (as in "my village"), Palumbo offers a robust response: Catalfàro is *not* a "typical mafia territory," nor is it a hotbed of paganism and archaism. It is, however, a place where certain practices illuminate the toolkit with which the various mafias have created their own specific versions of the contemporary world. Generalizations about "the mafia" do not work; Palumbo's more cautious but theoretically more capacious generalization about how local social groups draw on pre-existing practices to frame and define their own distinctive modernities does instead offer a serious theoretical contribution. That distinctiveness, moreover, is Palumbo's central point. It is an easy idea to grasp in general terms, but a

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difficult one to sustain amid the hubbub of oversimplifications the media have promulgated about "the mafia." Indeed, terms like "the mafia" are conflations that should themselves set off warning bells.

Palumbo's method, which follows that of several predecessors but raises it to a more intense level of reflection, is best described as *indirect comparison*. This entails rich ethnographic descriptions that reverberate across a landscape of research done by Italian and foreign anthropologists over many decades. Moreover, Palumbo is well versed in a range of ethnographic studies from around the world, and this enables him to point to features of the local landscape that have what to his fellow anthropologists will be immediately recognizable parallels in other regions. Sicily is both *sui generis* in its specifics and yet, at the same time, full of immediately recognizable dynamics, their local inflections described here in telling and sometimes surprising detail.

One gets a further sense of what it must have been like to harvest this rich crop of ethnographic insights from the Afterword contributed at the end of the book by Jane and Peter Schneider. Here, Italian and Anglophone anthropologists of the Sicilian realities address each other with the respect that all good *mafiosi* expect of each other—and, in this telling, of the very saints to whom they look for solace and protection. To those saints, in turn, the mafiosi provide all the necessary trappings of religious devotion, conscripting centuries of tradition in the service of a controversial homegrown modernity. The seriousness draws energy from vast flows of humor and ribaldry. Amid the raucously masculine environs so hilariously described by the Schneiders, Palumbo reveals the steely ruthlessness that rejects the formal authority of state and church and exercises an alternative and no less modern form of power. His work is partly in dialogue—indeed, a mutually respectful dialogue—with that of the Schneiders. It is they, at the end of the book, who convey some sense of the day-to-day adaptability that it took all of them to win the trust of a distrustful society, a modernity always deeply suspicious of outside interest, always critically aware of its differences with the modernities of the official world. As foreigners, the Schneiders may have been afforded some leeway that Palumbo did not enjoy, but it is clear that they, too, joined in robustly in the festivities and noted peculiarities that also vary from one Sicilian context to the next. Their Afterword, in which the careful reader will find one or two details slightly divergent from those reported by Palumbo, by that very token offers an entertaining reinforcement of Palumbo's principled resistance to generalization.

It is now time for the reader to join the rambunctious feast and the insights that Palumbo offers on the scene behind the scene.

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NOTES

1. Here I distinguish between the two closely intertwined senses of the word: as a concept encapsulating a moral universe, and as a (largely criminal) organization.
2. Palumbo's gentle critique of my own extension of Roman insights to the larger Italian context forms a useful part of this same line of argument.

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