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Vittorio Mete, Fuori dal comune. Lo scioglimento delle amministrazioni locali per infiltrazione mafiose. Roma: Bonanno Editore, 2009, 219 pp.

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Book reviews

Vittorio Mete, *Fuori dal comune. Lo scioglimento delle amministrazioni locali per infiltrazione mafiose*. Roma: Bonanno Editore, 2009, 219 pp.

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I must confess that I first took up Vittorio Mete's book wondering why he chose to study the dissolution of local administrations for mafia infiltration rather than other, seemingly more effective, strategies for confronting organized crime in Italy. Indeed, the first chapter of this admirable work contains a useful overview of various antimafia provisions: criminal justice operations, laws protecting justice collaborators, laws hardening prison terms for convicted mafiosi, as well as a number of demonstrative civil society initiatives. Further reading, however, provides more than one convincing justification for his decision to focus on the special laws passed in 1991 that provide for the replacement of a mayor and the members of a town council when that administration is judged to have been infiltrated by a mafia cosca.

The mafia is Janus-faced. On the one hand as an "enterprise syndicate" its members engage in a variety of illegal enterprises, not the least of which is long distance trade in drugs, body parts, arms, and other dangerous commodities. Its other face – described as a "power syndicate" – is local, predatory, and territorial, as each mafia "cosca" seeks to develop and maintain power over a given domain, extorting tribute, conditioning political and administrative elites, and directing the distribution of critical resources among a subject population. The two faces are synergic manifestations of the same body: the enterprise functions depend on the capacity of the power syndicate while the territorial power of local mafiosi is enhanced by the profits they can generate in illegal traffics. Tellingly, the power and profits produced by trafficking are frequently channelled into control over local construction and speculation on properties, i.e., urban real estate. Any serious effort to counter the mafia as a power syndicate, i.e., to challenge its territorial control, has to take aim at its capacity to infiltrate local administrations – nodal points in the distribution of employment, public works contracts, construction variances, and the regulation of building land. That was precisely the aim of the 1991 laws that are the objects of Mete's research, and it is the reason why his study of the creation, implementation and efficacy of those state provisions makes the book well-worth reading; and there are other reasons as well.

Mete begins with a careful empirical overview of the geography and temporality of antimafia provisions in general – the where and when of measures taken by the state (or elements of the state) and civil society activists to confront organized crime. An analysis of these data includes the political conditions that predispose the authorities to select certain communities for the application of the provisions under the 1991 laws. Like many of the other antimafia measures, the tempo of the special administrative dissolutions and commissariats waxes and wanes with the shifting "level of attention on the part of public opinion and of the institutions paid to the problem of the Mafia and in particular the relation between mafia and politics" [p. 85, my translation].

Mete addresses the relations between mafia and politics in an intensive investigation of a particular case, that of Lamezia Terme, a Calabrian city of about 70,000 inhabitants. Lamezia was actually subjected to two dissolutions during which the mayor and town council were replaced by three commissioners appointed by the prefect. Mete was himself present during the second commissariat in 2005. In addition to collecting archival data and media reports, he administered questionnaires that he had designed to the relevant subjects and conducted extended personal interviews with town officials and other persons active in politics and social service.

His data reveal why it was relatively easy for mafiosi to condition local administrations, and why it is so difficult to dislodge that influence once it is established. In Lamezia Terme, as in much of the Italian south, political party and party identification give way to personal client and kin networks, and patronage takes the place of political ideology. Like money, the vote is fungible. It doesn't much matter where it comes from, or from whom, so long as it provides a seat at the table for candidate X. Because votes are dedicated to the person of the candidate (*voto di scambio*) and not to his or her political "color" or position, temporarily unseating a cohort of mayor and councilpersons and replacing them with appointed commissioners is not likely to purify the political process. One of the most telling and ironic findings that Mete reports is, "as many as three out of four [respondents] maintain that they would have obtained the same number of votes had they been members of a different party in their own coalition, ... and of the 60 respondents, almost half (29) declare that they would have obtained more or less the same number of votes, even had they been candidates of a party in the opposing coalition." [p. 149, my translation].

Mete's analysis also illuminates a further obstacle. The special measures are ostensibly designed to defeat mafia infiltration of local administration by removing the mayor and town council from their governing roles, but the personalization of the political process is not limited to those actors. The same kin and client networks extend into the ranks of the administrative bureaucracy. Thus it is relatively easy for a locally powerful mafioso to infiltrate multiple layers of local politics, either in person or through his surrogates. In the end, the temporary suspension of the mayor and the members of the town council may not have much effect.

Having covered the actual process by which a governing commission is appointed and the obstacles it must inevitably encounter during its tenure, Mete offers a revealing discussion of the unintended consequences of the special measures. Instead of being weakened, the power syndicate's personal networks may enjoy continued unimpeded access to officials of the town bureaucracy. Furthermore if the administration is dissolved but the commissioners are not able to manage the affairs of the community effectively – partly because they are outsiders; partly because the mafia can still condition the local bureaucracy; partly because other institutions including the criminal justice sector are unstable or lacking in appropriate resources, and there is little coordination among all the antimafia efforts – then the position of the organized crime formation will only be strengthened in the larger community. In effect the mafia is able to outlast the immediate repercussions of the dissolution and rule by commissioners, as evidenced by Mete's data on the return to power of several mafia-linked political subjects.

A methodological appendix might have included a copy of the questionnaire and interview protocol that Mete developed for the Lamezia Terme study. But the author makes careful and creative use of quantitative data derived from official sources, media reports, the responses of leading actors to the questionnaire and intensive interviews. Narrative passages are buttressed throughout by tables that present numbers and percentages to good advantage in support of his argument. All told the book is an especially rich empirically grounded and theoretically provocative example of social inquiry at its best.

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