



Introduction

Early Morning Encounters

It was around 6 o'clock in the morning, but we were already late for the fields. I tried to explain to Piero, jokingly, that in English, 'work in the fields' can be verbally associated with 'fieldwork', which is what I was¹ doing there as an anthropologist, spending time in Sicily as the most vital part of my London-based doctoral pursuit.² He seemed unimpressed: 'Is this British humour?' As we stood looking at the hills on the horizon, kilometres away from the village boundaries, the cobalt blue of the spring skies seemed to intensify with every sip of the coffee, every drag of the cigarette. The staggeringly beautiful Welsh-like hills of the Palermitan hinterland in Western Sicily lay as the backdrop as a solemn crowd of men prepared themselves to drive towards the hilly landscape to dedicate their day to their land-plots.

This was the entrance to San Giovanni – a village located in the Spicco Vallata valley of Western Sicily – close to the main winery in this area of a tightly knit vineyard economy. We stood outside the *bar Sangiovannaru*, where most peasants took their morning coffee before setting off for their plots. The *bar*, in Italy, is a place where people gather to sip a coffee and, in the mornings, grab delicacies like a *cornetto*, a small croissant. In rural Sicily, places like the *Sangiovannaru* assembled exclusively men of all ages, from teenagers to those well into their eighties. No other place in San Giovanni was so lively as this bar at this time of day – or indeed any time of the day. I counted about forty people coming and going in the ten minutes we were there. This was the first month of my stay in the village. I had just met Piero, a member of the administration of the 'Giovanni Falcone' cooperative. As he was from Palermo (located 31 kms away from the village), I was interested in seeing how he behaved in the village cafés, not being a local.

We were on our way to Saladino, a five-hectare tract of land that eight years previously had belonged to Giovanni Barbeto,³ a local imprisoned *mafioso*, which the state had confiscated and allocated to the Falcone cooperative. Our day plan – and this was in the first days of March, frosty

but clear in the early hours – was to arrive at the vineyard at 6 AM and spend the day spraying sulphite (a natural preservative) on the organic vines. We stood around a stool just outside the bar doors, occasionally sharing a *buongiorno* with the incoming men. Just as we were about to light up a second cigarette, taking a few more minutes of indulgence, a middle-aged man approached us where we stood and started talking. He presented a lighter and lit our cigarettes. Without introducing himself, he then launched into a long complaint to Piero about the ‘complete mess the co-ops have made’ in local agricultural work relations. There used to be a genuine local market for agrarian labour that was now going through what he called, with particular emphasis, ‘worrying developments’. Emphasising every word he uttered, he pointed at Piero, saying,

You, your cooperatives, are ruining the game here, with your rules and regulations and stuff . . . you know, people that have worked for me, in my plots, as they’ve done for ages, all of a sudden ask for more dosh, saying, ‘Hey you don’t give enough, and how about those [social security] contributions for a change? Look at these new cooperatives, they pay much more, they pay the social security, I might knock on their door instead.’ I’ve been having this since you anti-mafia people started your business.

The man left and we got back on the tractor that we came with and set off. I was a little perplexed but had an idea about what was going on – an idea that Piero confirmed: the man was a small-time *mafioso*. But, at the same time, Piero told me, the man’s rant was not atypical of local reactions to, as he put it, ‘what the state and the cooperatives have achieved in San Giovanni’. I was presented with a tangible case of reactions to change as channelled through the cooperatives; this was why I was in Sicily, after all, to explore grassroots reactions to a social change inflicted from above but also pursued laterally among ordinary Sicilians.

This vignette is just one of many episodes illustrating how the coming of the ‘anti-mafia’⁴ cooperatives – cooperatives that cultivated land that the state had confiscated from *mafiosi* – brought about a small breakthrough in the agrarian life of San Giovanni.⁵

When local agrarian workers talked about their work conditions with me, they said that mafia patronage had depressed wages for generations. In discussions about access to resources and labour markets, locals suggested that the cooperatives⁶ had brought about a relative change in accessing jobs and also a (minor) shift in ways of thinking about labour – and the mafia. Expressing the aims of the cooperatives, Gianpiero (then a thirty-two-year-old man from Palermo), the representative of the Paolo Borsellino cooperative, told me,

I feel that the aim of the co-ops will be reached when I hear the peasants in the bars talking about trade unionism, not just F. C. Juventus. Our aim is to offer access to the confiscated land, standardise labour rights and change consciousnesses.

Trade unionists told me that the Spicco Vallata anti-mafia cooperatives were arguably the first agrarian businesses in the area that always paid full social security contributions and a net pay of above six euros an hour for agricultural work. The cooperatives were composed of members who performed administrative office duties and members who worked the land. Moreover, they employed wage-earners for seasonal work. These daily workers, as well as the worker-members, typically earned a minimum of 51.62 euros a day (net), an amount that far exceeded all other work and pay accounts I encountered locally. The cooperatives' administrators had mostly monthly wages in addition to the full labour social security contribution made by the cooperative as their employer.

As the co-ops employed no more than one hundred people (members and short-term contract workers together), this wage and pay change was minute in the broader political economy of the area. Nonetheless, the cooperatives symbolically 'took on' the local mafia's labour patronage and were important contributors to the livelihoods of many local households and individuals. What is more, they had attracted attention and sympathy from across the cooperative movement as well as from the Italian civil society, with the odd journalist from domestic or foreign media⁷ rushing to San Giovanni every couple of months. They symbolised one of the most celebrated cases of grassroots economic activity against organised crime on possibly a global scale – and indeed, through work and the securing of livelihoods, 'not just through words and good intentions', as one such journalist from Germany confided to me with awe and admiration in a private chat.

'Legality' (*legalità*), a term people used to denote a positively engaged relationship to law, was key to this achievement. Cooperative workers considered that having a job in the cooperatives established the regularisation of workers' rights, precisely solidified in 'legality'. For cooperative administrators like Giampiero, the legality idea meant that community well-being would improve if all resources were legally regulated and mafia was curbed. Crucially, 'legality' entailed the end of informal work.

Giampiero spoke to me at length in an interview about the changes that wage employment in the cooperatives had brought about locally among the co-ops' manual workers, peasants who cultivated conventional grain and vines but were employed by the cooperatives. He suggested that

Libertà, the NGO catering to anti-mafia, as well as the administrators of Borsellino, the co-op he worked in,

had managed to convince the peasants using only the wallet [*col portafoglio solo*]: we ask them how much the *mafioso* pays them, they tell us, ‘he pays thirty euro a day’ [*iddu mi paga trenta euro a jurna*]. . . . OK, we tell them; last year the daily pay according to the law, the daily contract for agriculture was 51.62 euros. . . . So, come to us! . . . This is how much they get, legally. It’s the norm [*È la normalità*]. And so, imagine Theo, for the Borsellino co-op there were three hundred applications for *braccianti*⁸ positions! People realised that their interests were with the legality, the normality.

Problematizing the implicit economism of this argumentation, centred on people’s ‘interests’ and a quasi-utilitarian siding with ‘legality’ to explore these interests, is a starting point for this ethnography. As economic anthropology is rooted in material concerns, one can note how people’s material life is embedded in a number of other commitments that transcend the economic, yet important, shift in labour regimes that the anti-mafia cooperatives have brought about. Such commitments overlap with obligations and understandings that transgress Giampiero’s idea of the cooperative as an ‘enclave of good’ and an agent of change. These commitments lie in the social life of workers outside and around the cooperative environment, a social life including kinship and friendship relations, memories of landscape and labour, attitudes to land and land neighbourliness, and the cosmological ramifications of gossip and community.

Legality in terms of legal pay is just one, albeit central, example of how co-ops in Sicily, like in many cases elsewhere, attempted to create enclaves of ‘good’ economic practice in what their administrators perceived as a sea of sociocultural malice. This implies, to pursue the aquatic metaphor, that the tides of social life leave islets of benign capitalism undeterred. It also implies that people envision – and enact – economic practices based on ideas of ethical and fair logic by removing themselves from their environments.

But how can you seal out economic life from the social fodder it is embedded in? It might not come as a surprise that you probably cannot. This book explores and problematizes the *hows* of this *cannot*, providing a total immersion in the world of the Sicilian antagonisms between mafia and anti-mafia. Its narrative takes a threefold argumentation format. Firstly, the book takes cooperatives struggling against the mafia as its focal point to examine how some members of these organisations aim to exclude themselves from the – sometimes controversial – richness of

local social life. Secondly, it explores how this proves to be impossible, as the lives of co-op members themselves are embedded in a series of obligations, commitments and generally social relations that often fly in the face of anti-mafia co-op principles. Thirdly, it elucidates how some of these principles – foundational ideas for the anti-mafia such as ‘food activism’, ‘community’ or ‘land boundaries’ – contradict the very internal coherence of cooperatives and exacerbate divisions within them.

The book therefore explains how this anti-mafia political intervention not only informed aspects of cooperative activity but also entailed the promotion of values and relationships that opposed those that some local people, including cooperative members, lived by. Different moralities⁹ arose within the cooperatives, presenting the incongruities between the set goals of the project and its development on the ground. Consequently, I highlight the complex internal differentiations often faced by politicised cooperatives (where the constitution and activity of cooperativism is driven by a political project). Divisions of labour develop in politicised cooperativism because some cooperative members (are able to) identify with its basic political premises more so than others. Politicised cooperatives, albeit delivering degrees of social change, contain different ideas, practices and morals – sometimes complementary and others at odds with each other. Anti-mafia cooperatives’ main goal and practice was to offer stable employment, contributing to the bettering of locals’ livelihoods.

The book argues that co-op members’ embeddedness itself proves to be a renovating aspect for anti-mafia cooperativism, as co-ops really draw from local kinship, gossip, work memory and neighbourhood relations to acquire their actual operational form on the ground. The deployment of cooperative life is then fully immersed in the life of the locality: co-ops are constituted on the grounds of their members’ experiences, which are taking place both within and outside the co-op environments. This remark has a Sicilian premise, but I believe it addresses cooperativism at large as a project of egalitarianism – that is, an exercise in lateral economics and industrial democracy – that extends and is defined by the livelihoods of the people making cooperatives. It is the subject of this book to sing and problematise the body cooperative – ridden with ambiguities. The narrative and argumentation is structured as follows.

The dynamics of divisions and contradictions in cooperatives are historical: the genealogy of Sicilian agrarian cooperativism was framed by tensions between peasant mobilisation, the anti-mafia movement, mafia and the state (chapter 3). The analysis first indicates the emergence of divisions in anti-mafia cooperatives, wherein administrators identified

more strongly with the ideological flair of food and anti-mafia activism than local workers did (chapter 4). The co-ops' two-tiered system had been instigated via two incompatible spheres of recruitment: an ideological preference to staffing through political networks and the actuality of kinship patronage as well as the reality of forming anti-mafia families (chapter 5). I then show that, just as with the moralising discourses of activism, co-op administrators appropriated local gossip in order to demarcate moral borders around their own, and 'their' cooperatives', reputation in Spicco Vallata (chapter 6). What is more, the ethnography shows that workers' livelihoods outside the cooperatives continued to be entangled with informal local practices, some of which were, ironically, reinforced by anti-mafia cooperativism's promotion of waged employment (chapter 7). Claims to community was another ideological realm at play as it formed contrasting trajectories within cooperatives, most importantly influenced by outside agents, including mafia (chapter 8). This influence, as well as the neighbourhood with *mafiosi*, instigated further disagreements on how to approach *mafiosi*. In addition to this, attitudes towards the confiscated land also led to significant rifts in the co-ops, resulting in uncomfortable social arrangements between neighbouring land plots (chapter 9).

NOTES

1. The choice of the past tense of verbs throughout this book admittedly takes away some of the charm of the narrative. For this reason, I use the past tense throughout the book to mark that the events described should be contextualised in terms of social life in Spicco Vallata throughout 2008 and 2009, in the inter-subjective ways I experienced and came to analyse it.
2. The fieldwork took place as part of my doctoral project while working in Goldsmiths, University of London.
3. Barбето was the main mafia figure in San Giovanni during the 1980s and 1990s, notorious in Italy, for his spectacular car bomb assassination of the popular anti-mafia magistrate Giovanni Falcone in 1992 (not to mention the other 150–200 murders he admitted). He will be coming back in this narrative a few times. Falcone worked with Paolo Borsellino (also assassinated soon after), and with other magistrates, in the anti-mafia pool and was central in the state's struggle against Cosa Nostra.
4. 'Anti-mafia' is an established term in institutional and grounded life in Italy, adopted by authors as diverse as Jamieson (2000), Schneider and Schneider (2003) and Dickie (2004). I call the agrarian cooperatives that work on land confiscated from the mafia 'anti-mafia cooperatives', the emic term most often used in the village to describe them. The term in this form implies an ideology of opposing the mafia.

5. While I have anonymised all names of individuals, toponyms and local associations, this is not the case with widely known organisations that would be, in any case, easily identifiable in Italy. I have also not anonymised *mafiosi* who have been imprisoned *for life*, like Giovanni Barbeto, although I have otherwise changed the names of *mafiosi* (most of whom were released after spending three years, the minimum time for being a member of the mafia, in prison). The *mafiosi* I have encountered in San Giovanni were men who had been in prison for a while.
6. The major differentiation in agrarian cooperatives is between work-based co-ops, such as the anti-mafia cooperatives, and production-based co-ops, whose members are producers (Sapelli 1981). The former, composed of waged members-labourers, are work organisations with shared capital between members – in this case, the usufruct of land. The latter are composed of independent producers who sell their produce to a co-owned winery, which processes and distributes their produce (more on this in chapter 3, from a historical perspective). In the case of Spicco Vallata, the *Santoleone* co-op-winery catered for around eight hundred producer-members who sold their grapes for vinification and bottling.
7. Throughout my fieldwork stay I have encountered journalists visiting San Giovanni from as far away as Japan.
8. A *bracciante* is a person who works as a field hand, a daily land worker making a living through daily wage labour in an agrarian context. Although not specific to Sicily, historically, *braccianti* refers to landless peasants. These agrarian proletarians (Schneider and Schneider 1976; see also Roseberry 1978), were – and still are – people whose only means of livelihood were their *braccia*, their arms. The cooperatives' daily workers called themselves *braccianti*. It is a widely used term in Sicily, akin to the *bracero* notion (Kearney 2004).
9. I use this term to encapsulate people's evaluations of situations as ethically acceptable according to their standards and within their social situatedness; as the ethnography will show, definitions were dynamic and always contextual to people's experience.

