

Camorra in Montesacro. Urban and social transformation in a southern Italian community*

by Marco De Biase

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"Many of my friends are in jail for association with the camorra (Neapolitan mafia). I don't care what they do, so I keep seeing them. We grew up together in the same neighborhood. The politicians and rich families never left any room to act in this town. The only support and encouragement I got for the projects I attempted to develop over these last years came from those they call camorristi. They were the only ones who attempted to appreciate my ideas. The camorristi, the criminals are those sitting in parliament and in the Montesacro city hall, not my friends" (Stefano, 30 years).

"Since I've come out of jail everyone respects me. People are afraid of me. I have all kinds of boys around me asking what prison is like. They look up to me. I've satisfied all my wishes with the money I've earned: cars, clothes, drugs and women. If I'd taken a job, I'd have starved to death by now" (Cesare, 28 years).

Stefano was a young man who had always engaged in social activity. He lived in public housing and had a great number of projects in his head. He was unemployed when we met and was clearly angry when I spoke about it.

Cesare, on the other hand, had already been to prison. He was sent to jail for extortion and was accused of association with a camorra clan. He wasn't upset about this. Prison, for him, was a type of consecration.

Through Stefano's and Cesare's experiences it is possible to outline a social map of Montesacro, a little town, situated in the inland of the Campania region in the South of Italy. Here, close to Naples,



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such stories have been increasing dramatically for several decades.

The population of Montesacro amounts to some 12,500 inhabitants (according to the ISTAT survey of 2010). In 1971, it was 4119, 6037 in 1981, and 9675 in 1991. A stunning demographic growth compared to data prior to 1971, when the population only grew by a few dozen people each decade.

This residential explosion has been caused by a series of uncontrollable economic and political forces in a province where the population's curve has been characterised by a downward trend.

How could a town of farmers, shepherds, artisans and small traders embrace, in the context of a Western democracy, go down the path of organised crime-led development and organisation?

To answer this urgent question, I analysed the "dominant social block", as Gramsci would have it, who led the transformation of Montesacro. At the end of the Second World War, this "social block" was composed by a very powerful latifundist potentate, the municipal bureaucracy, the professional elite, the agrarian bourgeoisie and the clerical order, which owned most of the lands of the town. This "social block" began to evolve between the 1950s and 1960s through an industrial policy dictated by the state and by the political agenda of the Christian Democrats. This policy of growth poles fa-

voured the installation in Montesacro of sparse industrial complexes, which were shut down a few years later, and pushed a large portion of the local population from agriculture to wage labour in the factory.

This type of industrial policy immediately sparked a series of clientelistic mechanisms of recruitment, which were rooted in the town's historically strong power relations between classes. In this way, the new Montesacro wage labour population was heavily filtered by local potentates through a form of tacit camorristo: a series of power practices through which the acquisition of rights was misrepresented as a favour that eventually turned into a threat.

The next step of this "social block" took place in the 1960s and 1970s with the transformation of agrarian incomes into real estate incomes through a pact between local potentates, Christian Democrat politicians and municipal bureaucracy.

During this period the processes of accumulation of Montesacro's elite intertwined with the speculative pressures of some local entrepreneurs who were very close to the camorra groups.

In fact, these entrepreneurs started the real estate speculation. The building of the first condominiums attracted exogenous capital. This trend exponentially increased construction activity, increasingly eroded the land and compromised the country from an environmental point of view.

The transition from an agrarian to a real estate income triggered all possible forces available to the camorra in loco and corrupted the rest with substantial inflows of economic capital.

The enrichment that benefitted a certain external and local entrepreneurship in both fields of industrial and commercial construction, added up to the enrichment of professional and technical groups and of service companies. Little by little they transformed themselves in authentic lobbies active in the trading system of the electoral market.

The explosiveness of this power network and the driving force of the camorra as well as local entrepreneurs led to a rapid growth of Montesacro, causing an

unquantifiable variety of urban and social imbalances that made the clientelistic dependence on the dominant power spread like an oil slick among the poorer inhabitants.

The violent earthquake of 1980 (Il terremoto dell'Irpinia), which caused a thousand deaths in the region, exacerbated the speculative pressures, catalysing and linking them inextricably to the binomial disaster/development.

The earthquake and the huge amount of public funds allocated to reconstruction definitely brought Montesacro under the optic of the Neapolitan megalopolis. This explains both the demographic and economic inflows, induced by speculation and the expansion of the tertiary sector of the economy and the spread of mass distribution.

One of the most striking examples of this strong alliance of interests is the 30-year absence of the local strategic plan (PGRC - Piano Regolatore Generale Comunale).

The last PGRC dates back to 1985 and most of the new constructions or retail chains were built in derogation to this planning instrument and placed in the "red zones", i.e. where it is officially prohibited to build residential constructions due to hydrogeological risks.

In this context, Montesacro transformed from a town into an urban outskirts. An "outskirt in the woods", as it might appear

when looking at the town from the highway connecting Napoli with Canosa.

The urban development led to an exponential increase in social marginalisation, which has become an insurmountable barrier to participation in the town's social, cultural and political life.

Furthermore, the control of the territory by the camorra (which regulates the majority of public contracts), the de facto cancellation of an already weak political debate, the lack of meeting points, the

stic dynamics that have characterised the process of wealth accumulation of the local "social block" and the effects that these processes have had on the town's urban and social structure.

In Montesacro, supposed cultural specificities that would account for camorra groups' hegemony do not exist. Rather, everything boils down to modern capitalistic processes and to how these have been directed and interpreted by the dominant "social block", consisting of camorra and local elites.

As such, a great deal of the camorra's manpower – constituted through local recruits, as Stefano's and Cesare's cases show – embodies the double role of victim and executioner.

The camorra deceives many involved persons, making them believe that they are moving up the social ladder or simply getting richer through delinquent praxis. In reality, it disposes of them as criminal actors of the same licit and illicit market and of the same political-administrative system that has excluded and marginalised them.



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multiplication of shopping malls, supermarkets and megastores render the town a mere extension of the Neapolitan megalopolis.

For these reasons, the transformation of Montesacro and its social fabric has to be explained by pointing to the material-

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Montesacro (fictional name) Today,
Source: <http://www.lavoroculturale.org/camorra-periferia-nel-bosco/>

