

The Politics of Rural Violence in Comparative Perspective: South Carolina vs. Sicily, 1866-1874

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Introduction

An increasing number of scholars have started looking at the period of Reconstruction in the post-Civil War U.S. South in comparative perspective with contemporary socio-economic and political developments in other countries, following especially groundbreaking intuitions by Eric Foner, Rebecca Scott, Peter Kolchin and Steven Hahn. Since the 1980s, the above scholars have been particularly crucial in expanding our horizons on the significance of the experience of African American freedpeople in the U.S. South through comparative studies focusing on post-emancipation societies such as Jamaica, Cuba, and Russia, and also, in one case, on the elites of both Europe and the Americas. Comparative research has focused on the processes following emancipation of either slaves or serfs, from the struggle over land to the changing labor regimes and degrees of power exercised by the elites, to the changing notions of freedom and even citizenship. However, since comparative studies of Reconstruction have arisen in historiography as a natural continuation of comparative slave studies in America, the former have very rarely ventured beyond the examination of societies characterized by emancipation from slavery – with the notable exception of studies by both Kolchin and Hahn, which have dealt also with emancipation from European serfdom.¹

¹ See Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1983); Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Peter Kolchin, *A Sphinx on*

Yet, a novel and promising avenue for study in this sense could focus on the comparative examination of the Reconstruction U.S. South as a former slave society based on a predominantly agrarian economy with a contemporaneous society historically characterized by free labor and also with a predominant agrarian economy, such as post-unification southern Italy. A comparative study of this type would not only place in a different perspective the significance of the Reconstruction U.S. South's newly free agrarian regime when seen in comparison with post-unification southern Italy's long standing free agrarian order, and the contributions that African American ex-slaves and southern Italian free peasants made to both, but it would also help our understanding of the significance of the U.S. southern planter elites' specific practices of labor control in Reconstruction America, when seen against comparable practices of labor control adopted by southern Italian elites in post-unification Italy. In this connection, recent comparative studies on the nineteenth-century U.S. South and southern Italy have hinted specifically at the possibility of comparing social and labor relations in the countryside of what were essentially two heavily agricultural regions that, in comparable terms, by second half of the 1860s had been either reincorporated or newly incorporated into unified nation states through the American Civil War and through Italian unification.²

This paper compares the Reconstruction U.S. South with post-unification southern Italy by investigating specifically the origins and expansion of violent practices of agrarian vigilantism and criminal activity in the cotton-producing regions of upcountry South Carolina and in the citrus-growing regions of coastal western Sicily. In comparable terms, in both the

the American Land: The Nineteenth-Century U.S. South in Comparative Perspective (Baton Rouge, LA, 2003); and Steven Hahn, "Class and State in Postemancipation Societies: Southern Planters in Comparative Perspective", *American Historical Review* 95 (1990), 75-98.

² See Don H. Doyle, *Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question* (Athens, GA, 2003); Enrico Dal Lago, *Agrarian Elites: American Slaveholders and Southern Italian Landowners, 1815-1861* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2005); and Enrico Dal Lago and Rick Halpern, "Two Case-Studies in Comparative History: The American South and the Italian *Mezzogiorno*" in Enrico Dal Lago and Rick Halpern, eds., *The American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno: Essays in Comparative History* (New York, 2002), 2-24.

cases of upcountry South Carolina and coastal western Sicily, those violent practices were tightly related to both the regional agrarian past and to the specific historical circumstances of the period between the late 1860s and the early 1870s, and also in comparable terms those practices led to the creation of two particular traditions of illegal activity – the Ku Klux Klan in one case, the proto-Mafia in the other case – that had their epicentres in those two particular southern regions of the United States and Italy.

South Carolina's Cotton vs. Sicilian Citrus

In the late 1860s, cotton still dominated the overwhelmingly agricultural economy of upcountry South Carolina, continuing to be the state's most prized export, comparably to the way citrus, even though not as important to the pre-eminently agricultural economy of southern Italy, was the most prized export of coastal western Sicily, especially the region around Palermo – the so-called *Conca d'oro*. In general terms, though, on one hand, the trauma, destructions, and disruption of production of the American Civil War years had ushered in a temporary crisis in the production of U.S. southern cotton – whose prices, also as a result of increasing foreign competition, continued to be high for the entire period 1865-1875 – a crisis that would end completely only in 1880, when the U.S. South exported more cotton than in 1860.³ On the other hand, the production of Sicilian citrus survived mostly unscathed the brief but convulsive years of Italian national unification and its difficult aftermath and embarked on an upward spiral that continued without any sign of interruption from 1861 to the 1880s, effectively coming to a halt only by the years 1883-1887, mostly as a

³ See especially Sven Beckert, "Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War", *American Historical Review* 109 (2004), 1405-1438.

result of new and strong foreign competition.⁴ Yet, despite this important difference, in both cases, the landowning elites took steps to create contractual arrangements with their labourers with the aim of maximizing production and minimizing labor conflict, according to the particular historical circumstances and social conditions of the regions where they lived.

In upcountry South Carolina, as in the rest of the cotton-producing regions of the U.S. South, after the American Civil War the emancipation of the enslaved workforce had led to a contrast between, on one side, the former planters and farmers who sought to turn the clock back to the time of supervised and disciplined gangs of workers, and, on the other side, the freedpeople who opposed this prospect. Initially, at the time of Andrew Johnson's Presidential Reconstruction and of the enforcement of the Black Codes, planters had been able to enforce their terms, but by 1868, after the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and Johnson's subsequent impeachment, it was impossible for them to do so. As a consequence, given their desperate need for a workforce, planters sought and found a compromise by which they divided their cotton plantations in smaller plots, each of which was to be cultivated by a family of tenants under specific contractual arrangements, among which "sharecropping" became the most widespread in the relatively short time of only a few years. As we know, under sharecropping, the planters provided the freedpeople with a lease on the land they would work on in exchange for a share of the crop of a half or more. A well-established literature has shown how this system, even though, effectively, a compromise between the landowners' need for a workforce and the freedpeople's need for land, was highly

⁴ See especially Salvatore Lupo, "Tra società locale e commercio a lunga distanza. La vicenda degli agrumi siciliani", *Meridiana* 1 (1987), 81-112.

exploitative and led and maintained African American sharecroppers and tenants into a cycle of poverty.⁵

However, it is also true that sharecropping allowed the freedpeople to work in relative independence and without gang-like supervision, and, consequently, also to scatter throughout the lands owned by the landowners, rather than being confined within the former slave quarters – a phenomenon that Michael Fitzgerald has called “decentralized tenant farming.”⁶ At the same time, specifically in upcountry South Carolina, both the Union Leagues – set up by the freedpeople as agents of self-defense and political mobilization – and the Freedmen’s Bureau – set up by the American government to help the ex-slaves in their difficult transition from slavery to freedom – attempted to influence planters on topics ranging from the adequate share of the crops to give the labourers to the respect for their personal freedom. Yet, the general mood of the white population there was effectively summarized in a 6 August 1868 article in the *Yorkville Enquirer* – in Union County, one of upcountry South Carolina’s cotton-producing counties: “Negro labor must be supervised and constantly directed by intelligent white men ... before we can be again a farming people.”⁷ Thus, the seeds were sown for violent actions by white planters and farmers, and their allies, aimed at curbing the small but threatening degree of independence acquired by the freedpeople under the new labor regime.⁸

⁵ See on all these topics, especially Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (New York, 1988), 392-411; and W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York, 1935).

⁶ Michael Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South* (Chicago, 2007), 61.

⁷ *Yorkville Enquirer*, 6 August 1868, quoted in J.C.A. Stagg, “The Problem of Klan Violence: The South Carolina Up-Country, 1868-1871”, *Journal of American Studies* 8 (1974), 311. On the Union Leagues and the Freedmen’s Bureau, see especially Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 163-215.

⁸ On the origins of violence in Reconstruction South Carolina, see especially Richard Zuczek, *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina* (Columbia, SC, 1996).

As we have seen, in the cotton-producing regions of upcountry South Carolina, the monumental changes brought by the American Civil War, Emancipation, and the different phases of Reconstruction affected deeply both the agrarian regime and the relationship between planters and workers. Conversely, in coastal western Sicily the upheavals related to the 1860-61 process of Italian national unification and even the subsequent attempts by the Italian government to enforce harsh centralizing policies through the imposition of the 1863 *Pica Law* and the effective rule of the island with martial law, did not have particularly visible effects on either the Sicilian agrarian regime or the relationship between landowners and workers.⁹ Instead, from the 1860s onwards, the constant rise in the rate of production and export of Sicilian citrus to distant markets, first and foremost the United States, was a phenomenon that led to the rapid rise in economic importance of coastal western Sicily, where the local landowners grew the most prized qualities of lemons and oranges in large groves, competing against each other in terms of agricultural performance and innovation for the thriving international markets. Travelling in those regions in the early 1870s, Tuscan agricultural reformer Sidney Sonnino noticed that, as a consequence of the post-unification economic boom related to citrus cultivation, “every year there were new plantations, [and] methods of cultivation were improved.”¹⁰

Specifically, in the region around Palermo, unlike in other areas of Sicily that produced citrus, the landowners usually were not resident proprietors, but rather left their properties in the hands of middlemen called *gabellotti*, who acted both as rent collectors and as resident administrators. In fact, by this time, the *gabellotti* had become powerful and influential men in charge of maintaining law and order on the landed properties, especially

⁹ On Sicily in the 1860s, see Lucy Riall, *Sicily and the Unification of Italy: Liberal Policy and Local Power, 1859-1866* (New York, 1998).

¹⁰ Sidney Sonnino, “I contadini in Sicilia” in Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino, *Inchiesta in Sicilia* (Florence, 1876), 78. See also Salvatore Lupo, “I proprietari terrieri del Mezzogiorno” in Piero Bevilacqua, ed., *Storia dell’agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea*, Vol. 2: *Uomini e Classi* (Venice, 1990), 103-149.

through their recruitment and employment of both overseers and field guards. In the citrus groves, labourers worked under different types of contract, most of them sharecropping contracts, according to which the landowners supplied the land, the plants, and the water, while the tenants – often landless peasants – grew the citrus fruits, guarded the groves, and irrigated them constantly.¹¹ Citrus trees were both highly valuable and highly vulnerable, and the labourers' responsibility for their protection was a high-risk factor that limited their independence a great deal, leading to a system by which the landowners, increasingly concerned about their profits, hired “professional” guards to look after their trees and make sure that the labourers did their job properly. Thus, as John Dickie has remarked, it was the “combination of high vulnerability and high profit that created the perfect environment for the Mafia’s protection rackets.”¹²

The general agricultural contexts of the late 1860s were fundamentally opposite in upcountry South Carolina, in the middle of a crisis, and in coastal western Sicily, in the midst of an economic upturn. Yet, comparison shows that the landowning elites of upcountry South Carolina and coastal western Sicily operated in the agricultural sector with comparable aims and ideas of guaranteeing maximum profit and minimizing labor conflict through the development of contractual compromises that depended on the specific historical circumstances of the place and time. In the case of South Carolina, after repeated failed attempts to find a solution to the labor problem caused by the slaves' emancipation, the cotton-growing landowners settled for sharecropping, and in Sicily the citrus-growing landowners also implemented forms of sharecropping contracts with similar aims and results. In both cases, the contractual arrangements bound the worker to the land and its owner to a certain

¹¹ See Salvatore Lupo, *Il giardino degli aranci. Il mondo degli agrumi nella storia del Mezzogiorno* (Venice, 1990), 105-124. See also Augusto Placanica, “Il mondo agricolo meridionale. Usure, caparre, contratti” in Bevilacqua, ed., *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana*, Vol. 2, 261-324.

¹² John Dickie, *Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia* (London, 2004), 27.

extent, but they also allowed a certain degree of autonomy, which the elites were weary of and which, eventually, they took steps to curb in particularly violent ways.

The South Carolina Ku Klux Klan vs. the Sicilian Proto-Mafia

In both upcountry South Carolina and coastal western Sicily, agrarian management, and the profit that derived from it to the landed elites, was strictly related to the problem of labor control. In both South Carolina's cotton plantations and Sicilian citrus groves, labor worked with forms of contractual arrangements that tied somewhat the labourers to the land, but left them a certain degree of autonomy, which landowners in both regions were less than happy to accept, given their customary practices of strict supervision. Despite the different economic circumstances, in both cases the problem of labor control became even more acute in the late 1860s, when both upcountry South Carolina and Sicily witnessed political upheavals that threatened the power of the landowning elites. The latter's response was, in both case, to invent a new tradition of vigilantism – mainly through the Ku Klux Klan in upcountry South Carolina and through proto-Mafia activities in coastal western Sicily – one that guaranteed the social status quo and enforced labor control through violent practices, but also one whose distant origins were steeped deeply into the pre-Civil War and pre-unification pasts of the two regions.

In upcountry South Carolina, vigilante activities had started as soon as the American Civil War had ended. Helped by the racist policy of post-war Governor Benjamin Perry, who had supported the Black Codes, white supremacists had reformed the antebellum slave patrols, with the declared intent of keeping the African American workforce in its place. As Brian Kelly has shown, it was possible for them to do so because of the relative isolation of

freed African Americans in the South Carolina upcountry. Then, in 1868, came the Ku Klux Klan, which, in Kelly's words, "grew out of the reconstituted slave patrols that had been organized under the Perry government."¹³ The significance of 1868 lay in the presidential election as a general rehearsal for the organized tactics of violent intimidation of African American workers and Republican voters by the Ku Klux Klan, which the planters would exploit in full force shortly afterwards. With the Republican victory in the 1868 Presidential election and the opposition to the exploitation of African American workers by the Union Leagues, violence in upcountry South Carolina quickly escalated as planters felt that they were losing control of the freedpeople. In 1870, the Republican victory in the state elections heightened even more the tensions and confirmed the planters' deepest fears. Significantly, in that year, according to J. C. A. Stagg, "in many upcountry counties there were whippings of Negroes who were inclined to dispute the portion of the crop they were to receive or who had actually ginned and sold the crop contrary to the landlord's directions."¹⁴

By December 1870, upcountry South Carolina was enveloped in a reign of terror in which the Ku Klux Klan reigned supreme in nine counties – all, significantly, cotton-producing regions – among which the worst hit by the phenomenon were the counties of York, Chester, Spartanburg, and Union. Until President Ulysses Grant's 1871 imposition of martial law in those nine counties, the Ku Klux Klan was able to bring countless acts of intimidation and violence upon the African American workforce.¹⁵ As witness after witness testified in the subsequent Ku Klux Klan trials of 1872, the primary purpose of the intimidation and violence, besides preventing Republican sympathizers from voting, was to

¹³ Brian Kelly, "Land and Place: The Contours of Freedpeoples' Mobilization in Reconstruction South Carolina", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 35 (2008), 673; see also 666-667.

¹⁴ Stagg, "The Problem of Klan Violence", 314. See also J. Michael Martinez, *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan: Exposing the Invisible Empire during Reconstruction* (Lanham, MD, 2007), 107-132.

¹⁵ See Zuczek, *State of Rebellion*, 71-87; and Lou Faulkner Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials, 1871-1872* (Athens, GA, 1996), 19-39. Specifically on the case-study of York County, see Jerry L. West, *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County, South Carolina, 1865-1877* (Jefferson, NC, 2002).

control the work of the freedpeople, disarming them, and forcing them back to the plantations, as a freedman called Benjamin Gore reported in Chester County.¹⁶ In Julie Saville's words, "vigilantism targeted the marginal independence that freedpeople wrested from productive relations of the early share system by embezzlement, nighttime trade, and the cultivation of inappropriate patches of land."¹⁷ And in their endeavours to curb that independence, planters were assisted by landless whites, who were angry at the competition from now free African American labourers, as a freedwoman called Charlotte Fowler reported in regard to her husband's murder in Spartanburg in 1871.¹⁸ Effectively, with the determinant help of landless whites, upcountry South Carolina's white planters and farmers succeeded in their aim of overthrowing Reconstruction and paving the way for the return of the Democrats and of white supremacist politics, since they ultimately managed to reassert, in Alex Lichtenstein's words, their "unchallenged authority over a rural black force whose aspirations to economic independence had matched their ambitious ideals of political participation."¹⁹

Comparably to South Carolina, Sicily also had a long tradition of vigilantism and rural violence that predated the 1860s. Throughout the nineteenth century, as they rose increasingly in power, the *gabellotti* who administered the citrus groves for the rich landowners living in Palermo and surroundings had made use of mounted guards called *campieri*, specifically "apt to manage the workforce ... [and guarantee] the personal safety of

¹⁶ See Stagg, "The Problem of Klan Violence", 315. See also Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1971), 349-382.

¹⁷ Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Labor in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York, 1996), 129-130.

¹⁸ See Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 127.

¹⁹ Alex Lichtenstein, "Introduction: Rethinking Agrarian Labor in the US South", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 35 (2008), 626.

the proprietors”, in Salvatore Lupo’s words.²⁰ Steeped deeply in the tradition of use of the *campieri*, the illegal system of guarantee of the landowners’ personal protection that became the basis of the Mafia arose as a result of the particular historical circumstances of the second half of the 1860s. At that point, the problem of personal safety became a primary concern for western Sicilian landowners, as a result of increasing unrest; this was due to the rejection by large sections of the Sicilian population of policies – particularly taxes and enforced conscription – enforced by the Italian government, which most landlords had supported in the process of Italian national unification. The people’s anger, already worsened by the implementation of the 1863 *Pica Law*, finally exploded with the Sicilian revolt of September 1866, in which – according to a contemporary source – among the 12,000 insurgents there were at least “2,000 [citrus] grove tenants, peasants, and cart-drivers” from the countryside around Palermo.²¹ They stormed over the city, and they occupied it for several days, forcing the Italian government to send General Francesco Cadorna, who arrived with a large contingent of troops to put down the uprising by force, eventually leaving several hundred dead on the ground.²²

Effectively, the September 1866 revolt resulted in a major threat to the landed proprietors’ personal safety, and this convinced the owners of the citrus groves to resort to increasingly larger and better-organized private militias –the initial nuclei of proto-Mafia gangs – with the excuse to protect their tenants, but with the actual aim of protecting their persons and their valuable properties and at the same time controlling closely the tenants’ activities.²³ During the late 1860s and early 1870s, as the changing conditions of the world

²⁰ Salvatore Lupo, *Storia della Mafia dalle origini ai giorni nostri* (Rome, 1996), 47. See also John Dickie, *Blood Brotherhoods: The Rise of the Italian Mafias* (London, 2011), 89-95.

²¹ Vittorio Maggiorani, *Il sollevamento della plebe di Palermo e del circondario nel settembre 1866* (Palermo, 1866), 82.

²² See especially Lucy Riall, “Legge marziale a Palermo. Protesta popolare e rivolta nel 1866”, *Meridiana* 24 (1995), 65-94. See also Francesco Renda, *Storia della Sicilia*, Vol. 1: *Dal 1860 al 1870* (Palermo, 1984).

²³ See Francesco Renda, *Storia della Mafia* (Palermo, 1998).

economy led to a progressive rise in value of the Sicilian lemons and oranges and episodes of unrest threatened intermittently the landowners and their properties, private militias became ubiquitous in the citrus groves of coastal western Sicily. By then, the militias formed a well-organized and complex network, which one witness at a governmental inquiry called “a sort of national guard”, while one of the most influential landowners of the Palermo region, Niccolò Turrisi Colonna, called, in an influential pamphlet on the topic, “the sect.”²⁴ In essence, “the sect” was the proto-Mafia. By 1874, proto-Mafia militias of rival landowners competing for the same valuable citrus market in coastal western Sicily were fighting a war against each other, leading to the possibility that the Italian government, guided by men of the parliamentary Right, might enforce special anti-Mafia legislation on the island. Yet, in that same year, the regional elections gave the victory to the opposition of the parliamentary Left supported by the Sicilian landowners, leading to a major change in governmental politics, and to the consequent disappearance of the threat of anti-Mafia laws.²⁵

In both the cases of upcountry South Carolina and of coastal western Sicily in the late 1860s, the threat of a potentially revolutionary situation that threatened the social status quo and the long-established social hierarchies was the trigger that prompted a violent response by the landowners in the form of vigilantism and criminal activity. In upcountry South Carolina, by 1868, the unravelling of Radical Reconstruction, and the possibility of autonomy that it entailed for the freedpeople, unleashed a wave of violent intimidation against the latter that witnessed the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. In coastal western Sicily, the revolt of September 1866 and the threat that peasants and tenants brought to the landowners’ personal safety and

²⁴ Quotes in Lupo, *Storia della Mafia*, 55, 59. See also Niccolò Turrisi Colonna, *Cenni sullo stato attuale della sicurezza pubblica in Sicilia* (Palermo, 1864).

²⁵ See Giuseppe Carlo Marino, *L’opposizione mafiosa (1870-1882)* (Palermo, 1964), 91-119. See also Paolo Alatri, *Lotte politiche in Sicilia sotto il governo della Destra (1866-1874)* (Turin, 1954). According to John Dickie, the “sect became the Mafia when the new Italian state made ham-fisted attempts to repress it”; see Dickie, *Cosa Nostra*, 66.

property led to the proprietors' increasing use of violent proto-Mafia militias. In both cases, at their core, the related problems that the landowners faced focused both on ensuring that the cultivation of a valuable crop – cotton in one case, citrus in the other case – continued without major interruptions, despite the very different economic situations of 1860s South Carolina and Sicily, and also on maintaining a tight control over the activities of the workforce through criminal activities that reached their peak in the early 1870s.

Conclusion

Sustained comparison of the agrarian conditions of upcountry South Carolina during Reconstruction and coastal western Sicily after Italian national unification shows clearly that, even though different in a number of ways, both case-studies were characterized by the importance of the production of valuable cash-crops – cotton and citrus – and by the landowners' need to maintain the continuity in the economic and labor systems that guaranteed the production of those crops. Also, in both cases, there existed a long-standing tradition of agrarian violence in the form of self-regulating and informal militias – the slave patrols and the *campieri* – employed to police the workforce and also ensure the landowners' personal safety. The exceptional circumstances of the late 1860s, with Radical Reconstruction in upcountry South Carolina and the post-unification rural unrest that characterized coastal western Sicily, led to the landowners' adoption of illegal violent practices that built upon those long-established traditions in order to ensure the continuation of the status quo in both economic and social terms. These violent practices were, in practice, vigilante and criminal activities carried out by Ku Klux Klan and proto-Mafia gangs and directed against all potential threats posed by autonomous or unruly behaviour by tenants and labourers working on cotton plantations and citrus groves. Yet, in a completely different turn

of events, by 1872 South Carolina's Ku Klux Klan was disbanded by the intervention of the U.S. government, while, after 1874, the Sicilian Mafia continued to rise in importance and in power in liberal Italy.