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Secrets of Life and Death: Women and the Mafia by Renata Siebert; Liz Heron

Review by: Claire Bond Potter

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Death-defying women

by Claire Bond Potter

Secrets of Life and Death: Women and the Mafia, by Renata Siebert, translated by Liz Heron. London and New York: Verso, 1996, 326 pp., \$65.00 hardcover, \$20.00 paper.

MEN DIE, WOMEN WEEP And, as Renata Siebert documents in this fascinating study of organized crime in contemporary Italy, women fly to New York with heroin taped to their bodies, enter loveless marriages which cement gang alliances, and press automatic weapons into their teenage sons' hands to ensure the completion of a vendetta. Alternatively, they unite on the feminist left to press charges against assassins, risking ostracism, penury and death to do so.

A professor of sociology at the University of Calabria in Italy, Siebert draws on feminist theory, European leftist critiques and the urgent activist politics of a women's anti-mafia movement in Italy to re-evaluate the masculine romance of Italian crime. The testimony of female survivors, organizers and politicians provides a vital counter-narrative to the tradition of mafia terror, helping Siebert to explore a resistance catalyzed by mourning and to illuminate the power of witnessing as it interrupts the daily forms of acquiescence that terror depends on.

As Rosa Giaccone, widowed by mafia violence, observes, grief leads either to more death or to new life. Addicted to tranquilizers following her husband's murder, she determined "either I do away with myself or I make a new start. So I decided to live and to fight. I washed my face and braced myself and went out to do battle."

Secrets of Life and Death proposes that the masculine mystique of mafia hierarchy and ritual purposely limits scrutiny of a criminal terrorism lodged in the most basic unit of society, the family. It analyzes the centrality of masculinity, homophobia and misogyny to mafia ideology; the extensive participation of women in mafia crimes; and the feminist organizers who call to account criminals and the state which acquits them. Siebert highlights the many ways gender is deployed to ensure the profits of criminal organizations. If, she argues, the judiciary, the police and "the category of those who kill is made up almost exclusively of men," we must illuminate the lives of "women who connive and are complicit, women who are subordinate and women who rebel."

The foundation for a feminist attack on the mafia is the analysis and acknowledgment of female complicity. Siebert comments that "from the outside it is not easy to imagine in what ways and to what extent the women have knowledge of the bloody and criminal activities of their brothers, husbands, and sons." But, in addition to the criminal acts that can be more effectively hidden by using female perpetrators, mafia rule and the law of *omertà* depend on the maintenance of a female domestic sphere where criminal men seek refuge from the violent world they create.

Organized crime in southern Italy and Sicily has intimate ties to drug trafficking and racketeering in the United States. These international connections permit Siebert to draw on popular memoirs by Italian American mafiosi to demonstrate that these crimes are justified by a language of patriarchal Italian traditions that has survived transplantation to a different political culture. The bulk of the book, however, explores the specifics of Italian politics and female activism since the mur-

ders of judge Cesare Terranova and general prosecutor Gaetano Costa in 1979-1980.

Much of this activism was grounded in other Italian political movements, specifically feminism and the anti-Fascist left. In 1980, Communist women, led by the widowed Rita Costa and Giovanna Terranova, spearheaded a women's anti-mafia petition drive that catapulted the Association of Sicilian Women Against the Mafia to national prominence and subsequently galvanized support for female witnesses and plaintiffs in the "maxi-trial" of 475 mafia defendants in 1985-86.

As Hannah Arendt observed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the activities of modern states can be indistinguishable from those of criminal organizations, particularly in the daily brutalization of individual rights that renders terror "normal." (The connection between the totalitarian potential of organized crime and other right-wing movements has since been explored in Claudia Koonz's 1979 history of German women under National Socialism, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, and Katherine Blee's 1993 study of female Ku Klux Klan auxiliaries in the United States, *Women of the Klan*.) Some mafia wives claim that their marriages should not be judged: "Don't I have a right to love a man and follow the law of nature?" Antonia Bargarella demands. Anti-mafia women resist such normalizing rhetoric: one responds, "I might ask her how she has been able to let that slimy hand caress her for so long, how she has allowed him to touch her children." Collaboration with murderers has personal and political significance. "Like totalitarian dictatorships," Siebert argues, "the mafia endows itself with the right over life and death; where mafia 'law' is in force there is capital punishment."

Siebert's commitments to this work are grounded in personal history as well as contemporary politics. As she explains, her childhood in Germany during World War Two schooled her in the "anxious expectation of imminent and unavoidable atrocities"; her youth was defined by the conviction that "crimes and brutality could...be prevented by the force of will and reason." The connections between Fascist oppressions and mafia terror are unavoidable, particularly in the ways that each is sustained by a passive citizenry. In a trajectory opposite to that of second-wave feminism in the United States, however, Siebert has relocated hope for progress "from society and collectivity to the individual, to woman or man in the singular."

WHY THIS REVERSE TRIP from the political to the personal? Because, as Siebert shows, the twentieth-century democratic state in Italy has failed profoundly in its obligation to secure human rights and an atmosphere of social justice that would support those rights.

As mafia violence against the Italian government escalated throughout the 1980s, activists of the Association of Sicilian Women reclaimed a specifically female moral authority over life in an attempt to legitimate their demands on a corrupt state that could not, and would not, bring these murderers to trial. The Associ-

ation has struggled to make its case loudly and publicly and, as one member, Piera Falluca, wrote in 1993, to rehabilitate female collaborators. "Some of our members could not tolerate being in the same room as these women," she admits:

These were reactions that are perhaps understandable in human terms, but very short-sighted from a political point of view. . . . Even if a mafia woman were to turn state's evidence and come to us she ought to be supported with any means we have! It would be a huge step to take and we would have to help her, back her up, give her our solidarity. (p.287)

What might otherwise be understood as an essentialist politics of female moral authority is given new complexity by shrewd tactical thinking. Working from Sara Ruddick's theory of maternal thinking (*Maternal Thinking*, 1988), Siebert makes a serious argument for the importance of life-affirming moral stances in the face of death-dealing capitalism. The testimonies she has collected demonstrate that, even when the courts fail to convict assassins, and when families who seek justice are silenced by intimidation, financial ruin and murder, the most powerful politics is to continue to be visible and speak the truth. "Whatever anyone says, I'm convinced that motherly feelings are stronger than violence and stronger than the mafia," declared Angela Casella, who haunted the villages surrounding Locri, sleeping in a tent, chaining herself in village squares, asking other mothers to sign a "solidarity notebook" to pressure the mafia to release

her kidnapped son Cesare. Cesare was eventually freed, and Casella's protests inaugurated other forms of anti-mafia action in Locri.

Casella's invocation of the power of maternity evades essentialism by making demands for human rights visible on, and through, the mother's body. As Rita Costa reminds us grimly, "forgetting is the most powerful tool in the service of power." The political power of this female "other" is raised as an alternative to—not a cure for—pervasive judicial, political and economic corruption, violent intimidation and social tolerance for *omertà*, the mafia ideal of male honor. Siebert lays a foundation for this argument in the first section of the book, where she shows that the representation of mafiosi as "men of honor" depends on rituals that commodify women and repress the feminine.

Secrets of Life and Death links the power of witnessing to an anti-terrorist moral vision, illuminating women's participation in and opposition to a world that is popularly understood as thoroughly masculinist. It provokes us to consider feminist obligations to all spheres in which individual rights are undermined by terror, whether by states alone or by other organizations that states refuse to regulate or repress. Siebert's work holds valuable lessons for many feminists in the United States, who often see lucid political arguments and personal or emotional testimony as antithetical strategies. Most of all, Siebert has helped to tell the story of terrifyingly courageous women: "I thank with all my heart," she concludes, "all the women who are present in this book." ♦♦

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