

## RECENSIONI

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**Alison SÁNCHEZ HALL** | *All or none: Cooperation and sustainability in Italy's red belt*, New York, Oxford, Berghahn, 2018, pp. 300.

This is a political book in a twofold sense, in that it provides a thorough investigation of a socioeconomic phenomenon that sprung out of a strong political culture and that its main aim is to suggest alternative paths to our current predicament. These paths are alternative but not utopian; in fact, much of the book's argument is a practical thesis rooted in the historical and ethnographic empirics of an achieved alternative to the dominant conceptual dependence on free-market fundamentalism. The empirical reality of the rural areas of Romagna -the agricultural hinterland of Faenza and Ravenna- provides, shows the author, a powerful argument for the possibility of constructing a cooperative life that mobilizes an agrarian population in ways that are both sustainable economically and cohesive socially. The force of that argument is in its detailed description of how the cooperative movement in Emilia-Romagna, traditionally a "red" area of the country, managed to ensure a dignified life for its rural inhabitants, who had been through long periods of repression and exploitation.

The argumentation is done in implicitly comparative ways – sometimes less subtle than others. The author endorsed the social experiment of her Romagnol interlocutors in two waves of engagement with them: the first time was in her 20s, during fieldwork in 1972. Having hit "red" Italy after being raised in California, she notes in hindsight: "I came to feel like the first anthropologist in the history of the discipline whose informants thought she came from a backward culture to study their most advanced ways" (p. 2). The second time she did fieldwork in Romagna was in the course of several trips between 2010 and 2014, to attest to the "persistence of the cooperative spirit" (p. xvi), and revisit many interlocutors from her original fieldwork. This book is therefore original in that it draws from both



the first and the second fieldwork (40 years in between), as well as from extensive secondary historical material. In that way, here we appreciate a holistic phenomenon in at least three tiers – an immediate ethnographic one, one attempting a comparison between two different ethnographic moments and one taking on the long history of the region’s fertile geography that led to interesting developments in agrarian sociology, of which the cooperative system was the culmination.

We come to appreciate this long historical narrative in chapters 4, 5 and 6, which constitute the bulk of the book’s empirical discussion, leaving the ethnography proper to chapters 1, 7 and 8, while chapters 2 and 3 provide the geographical, sociological and political economic exegesis of the region and its cooperative movement. The first chapter narrates the author’s long engagement with the area and mobilizes the main argumentation pattern of economic cooperation as a myth-busting phenomenon for mainstream economics’ obsession with rational choice and selfish maximization. The extended case is presented in detail in the second chapter where Ravenna and its area are discussed across the 40 years of the two fieldwork engagements. Chapter 3 then delves into the *political* aspect of the “political economy” of the area: the “red” element in the cooperative development in the Emilia-Romagna miracle. Chapter 4 offers the long historical outlook, from the early Middle-Ages to just after the Risorgimento; chapter 5, under the telling title “Land to those who work her” treats the period from 1861 and thereabouts to 1922 – providing an excellent review of the tensions between property, labour organization and the development of the collective tenure management from mutual aid societies to modernized farms. In chapter 6, we encounter another tension: that between bottom-up and grassroots solutions to collective farming, in the years of the *ventennio*, the Liberation and the Marshall plan. The author then ethnographically presents how the “bottom up” agenda came about with such success in the last two chapters, where she discusses how cooperatives managed to “make work” for the Romagnols.

It is of timely importance, as the Left has been collapsing in Italy, to consider such books that stand as social scientific reminders of the recent achievements of red cooperation in the country. The monograph does not only criticise the massive problems of the homo *economicus* concepts, the way almost all economic anthropology books do, but actually presents an ethnohistorical realm of the possible – a positive example that Italy can suggest to the world. The choices of the author in showcasing her case-study, are admittedly done with most probably a US audience in mind. In

many moments in the book there is a tone of incitement and suggestion; one thinks that the major aim of the book is to motivate and inspire, with the critical analysis coming as a secondary goal. This is not to say that there is not a very careful discussion of the literature and the wider sources – especially in the three historical chapters.

The main postulation of the conceptual apparatus for the book, however, could have possibly benefited from a tad deeper discussion of the main problem it addresses, that is how we can deconstruct the presentation of profit-seeking as a natural pursuit and the downscaling of cooperation's potential of. This discussion (done especially in the preface, in chapter 1 and in the conclusion) draws extensively from specific sources (for example, Charles Erasmus), as does the discussion of cooperation (from Michels, Vöchting), while the emancipatory prospect of the commons and collective economies draws from theory mainly outside anthropology (Chomsky, Ostrom) and less so from within it (e.g. Graeber). As economic and political anthropology is an exercise in realistic alternative life scenarios, the array of anthropological inspiration could have been wider. That said, the book does contribute substantially both to these domains and to the burgeoning current Anthropology of Italy.

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