

Review: Did Christ Stop at Eboli?

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Book Review

Did Christ Stop at Eboli?

Gabriella Gribaudi, *A Eboli. Il mondo meridionale in cent'anni di trasformazione* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990), pp. xxi, 293.

If any of us has ever heard of Eboli, it is thanks of course to Carlo Levi's famous book, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, first published in 1945 and translated into English in 1948. But many Italians and non-Italians alike, and even many of the inhabitants of Eboli itself, have been misled by Levi's title. As Gabriella Gribaudi explains patiently and amusingly in her Introduction, Levi's book was *not* about Eboli, whereas hers is. The popular saying, 'Cristo si è fermato a Eboli', signified that Christ, representing civilisation, had not got *beyond* the little town of Eboli, which dominates the plains of the river Sele, in the province of Salerno. After Eboli come the mountains; and Christ had left to their fate the lands that came further to the South, including the forgotten villages of the Basilicata, which were Levi's enforced ports of call.

Modern scholarship has moved in the opposite direction. The social anthropology of the Mezzogiorno, with one or two exceptions,¹ has concentrated on the forgotten villages of the interior, leaving uncharted those parts of the South – the coastlines, plains and deltas – which have seen the greatest transformations and growth. It is the first of the many merits of Gribaudi's fine book that she has chosen to redress the balance, to lead us back to where Christ was supposed to have stopped, to the most modern part of the South.

A Eboli is a work of great subtlety, the fruit of ten years of research, and of a strongly inter-disciplinary approach. Gribaudi's aim is to reveal 'the polyphony and profundity' of an extremely complex society. She proceeds by way of dichotomies: geographical, political, methodological, of gender. One of the most constant dichotomies is that between the town of Eboli and the hostile, malaria-infested plains of the Sele that lie below it; another is the rivalry within Eboli between the 'party of above' and the 'party of below', the one representing the traditional values of the old town, its houses clustered around its rock and dominated by the castle; the other, the party of the new Eboli, of the socially mobile and the bearers of

¹ J. Davis, *Land and Family in Pisticci* (London, 1973); D. S. Pitkin, *The House that Giacomo Built* (Cambridge, 1985).

'modernity'. Methodologically, the strongest dichotomy is that between the many oral testimonies which the author has painstakingly collected and the evidence of the notarial archives, which often destroys collective myths and rudely reveals the deficiencies of memory.

None of these contrasts, of course, is as straightforward as it has been presented here. The parties of 'above' and 'below', for instance, are constantly being redefined with the passage of time, with the 'party of above', the liberal élite, slowly metamorphosing into the PCI (the Italian Communist Party). Gribaudo charts Eboli's transformations, but reveals beneath their surface long-established cultural frames and conflicts.

Her treatment is only loosely diachronic; it is punctuated, especially at the beginning, by a series of flashbacks, by the tracing of key family lineages, and by analysis of certain cultural categories, like the 'uomo di rispetto', one of the most enduring of Eboli's epithets. But after the first hundred pages, the history of Eboli begins to unfold in a more ordered way. The town is dominated after Unification by the 'civili', the liberal élite who are the original incarnation of the 'party of above'. They are paternalist towards the peasantry but clientelist for themselves. As early as 1878 we find the vice-prefect Giustini complaining of the 'vast quantity of stipends and pensions' being paid to those 'with close kinship links with the municipal councillors'. Gradually, this élite is challenged by the 'party of below', merchants of humble origin, producers of *pasta*, men who have got rich from the contracts awarded by the municipality. They become wealthy but not politically powerful, and their triumph is not complete until they throw in their lot with Fascism.

The Fascist period sees the first major interventions by the state in the economy, with the programme of land reclamation and the growth of service industries. The plains of the Sele are transformed from grazing grounds for the buffaloes (whose milk produces the best *mozzarella* cheese) into fields of grain and tobacco; the first tomato canning factories open. Fascism, though, never has a monolithic face; different interests continue to wage war for control of the municipality.

After the war, there occurs what Gribaudo rightly calls the 'crucial watershed'. Old Eboli, bombarded by the Allies, is never rebuilt. In 1947–8 the state unceasingly showers the town with millions of lire with which to reconstruct; 'nothing like it had ever happened in the past'. From now on the resources of the state dominate the local economy. The fight for control of these funds is waged uninterruptedly, leading to the rise and fall of a new sequence of élites: first the old Fascists, who rapidly don Christian Democrat hats; then, from 1959 onwards, the new Christian Democrats, supporters of Fanfani, a group of white-collar workers who have been educated in the confraternity of the Immacolata di Santa Maria della Pietà. These are the real 'mediators' (the title of Gribaudo's previous book²), the controllers and distributors of the flow of money from centre to periphery. Finally, in the 1970s and 1980s, it is the turn of the Socialists. In the local elections of 1980 they poll 31.6 per

² G. Gribaudo, *Mediatori* (Turin, 1980).

cent of the votes, equalling the Christian Democrats for the first time. The Socialists at Eboli claim to be the new 'uomini di rispetto', the real 'modernisers', dynamic and entrepreneurial in contrast to the conservative and bureaucratic Christian Democrats. In reality, their mode of operation is very similar and their wealth accumulated in time-honoured ways: building speculation, the control of the labour market, the contracts offered by the town council.

What about the opposition? Gribaudo says less about the Communists than she might, and much of that is ferociously critical; in an earlier article,³ to which she strangely never refers, she said much more and with greater equanimity. The Communists led the important struggles for the land in 1949–50, but thereafter, claims Gribaudo, were unable to adjust to rapidly changing social realities. One of the crucial problems was their cold moralism, their refusal to do favours, to use the same language and methods of their opponents. As one exasperated interviewee told Gribaudo in March 1980: 'The Communists must change! People here say: the reason the Communists haven't robbed is simply because they've never been in government; people couldn't care less that they've kept their hands clean! It's high time they started stealing too, and handing out the proceeds!' (p. 188, n. 34).

The acuteness of Gribaudo's ear and eye is one of her major assets. Especially striking is her account of strawberry picking on the plains of the Sele one day in May 1981 (pp. 257–65). The intensive cultivation of strawberries is only the latest in the long line of transformations of the plains' agriculture. In the period about which Gribaudo writes, up to ten thousand women came down to the plains on a daily basis from the surrounding villages and hills, a veritable flotilla of minibuses ferrying them to earn an average 15,000 lire each for a day's work. Gribaudo joined one of these minibuses, and talked at length with the women and the *caporale* who drove the bus and controlled a small segment of the labour market. She found to her astonishment not the system of semi-feudal servitude habitually denounced by the press but a bus full of joking and irreverent women, among whom was the *caporale's* mother.

Gribaudo's treatment of the women of Eboli, both of the upper and lower classes, is among the best thing in the book. She takes issue with the Mediterranean stereotypes of much previous scholarship, whereby the male–female dichotomy has been presented overwhelmingly in terms of strong and weak, honour and shame, external and internal spaces. Instead, the female world of Eboli reveals its own force and autonomy, its combative power rather than its submission to the male world. It is this very *conflict* between the sexes, suggests Gribaudo, which is one of the roots of that defensiveness combined with aggression which is so characteristic of Eboli's culture.

A Eboli is not always an easy book to read. It is marred by the lack of a strong narrative line, which makes it unnecessarily difficult to follow. The notarial archives are not only over-valued as a source, but are often presented in undigested form, making some chapters, such as 5 and 13, very unrewarding. While a surfeit of

³ *Idem*, 'Mito dell'eguaglianza e individualismo: un comune del Mezzogiorno', in G. Chianese *et al.*, *Italia 1945–50. Conflitti e trasformazioni sociali* (Milan, 1985), 455–575.

genealogies and of dowry lists are presented in the main text, really important pieces of information are often hidden away in the footnotes. The only voting figures on offer are to be found on p. 286, n. 22, and we discover by pure chance, in the middle of a sentence on p. 184, that there was actually a Communist mayor at Eboli between 1953 and 1955. For one who can write as well as Gribaudi often does, not enough attention has been paid to the legitimate needs of her readers.

None the less, she has written a book as subtle and profound as her subject and has made a major contribution to the study of Mediterranean society in the twentieth century. Her conclusions (p. 291) are bitter and worth reproducing at length:

Nothing is further from reality than an image of the Mezzogiorno in which the state is absent, or of the Mezzogiorno in contrapposition to the state, visions which are too frequently suggested in debates on the Mezzogiorno, often in the most dramatic of ways. Instead it is precisely the centralising and pervasive presence of public institutions and their near monopoly of the economy which have produced the distortion of accumulation, the demotion of entrepreneurs and intelligentsia, the consolidation of that network of parasitism and mediation which inevitably brings inefficiency and corruption in its wake. This is a vicious circle with so extended a circumference as to induce the blackest pessimism.

To the deformed presence of the state must be added the consequences of that defensive/aggressive consciousness which is the 'profound substratum of the culture of Eboli' and which links closely to that lack of trust which Gambetta has identified as being essential to the growth of mafia.⁴ Organised crime in the form of the *camorra*, not previously a feature of Eboli society, has spread its tentacles to the town in the last ten years. Christ may once have stopped at Eboli, but there is little evidence that he is likely to return in the near future.

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⁴ G. Gambetta, 'Mafia: the price of distrust', in *idem*, ed., *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (Oxford, 1988), 158–75.