
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *I cento passi* (The Hundred Steps) by Fabrizio Mosca, Marco Tullio Giordana, Claudio Fava and Monica Zapelli

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Source: *The American Historical Review*, Jun., 2001, Vol. 106, No. 3 (Jun., 2001), pp. 1109-1110

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2692533>

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name (from Congo to Zaire), and transformed his own identity (from Joseph Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko, the “all-powerful warrior”).

Although Mobutu’s political skills were considerable, his success also depended on the support of his Western friends, most importantly the Americans, the French, and the Belgians. In this respect, Mobutu was a man of the Cold War, viewed by the West as an indispensable ally in the struggle to contain Soviet expansionism. During Mobutu’s visit to the White House in the late 1980s, for example, President Bush paid homage to him as “one of [America’s] most valued friends.” In return for aid and loans from the west, Mobutu allowed the United States to send covert arms shipments through his country to supply UNITA rebels in Angola and permitted France to use Zaire as a staging area for its operations in Chad and the Central African Republic.

As the documentary reveals, Mobutu played the diplomatic game skillfully, charming heads of state with his charismatic public persona. As one former ambassador put it, Mobutu was a “master of diplomacy.” But, as the Cold War waned, so did Mobutu’s fortunes. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States and Europe pressured Mobutu to “democratize” Zaire, a transition that unleashed a flood of discontent, forced Mobutu into exile, and brought Laurent Kabila to power in 1997 (Kabila was assassinated in early 2001 and has been succeeded by his son Joseph.) Mobutu, the man who had attained godlike status, who considered himself the father of his country, ended his tenure old, sick with prostate cancer, and reviled by everyone. As one former government official concluded, in the end, “all those who made [Mobutu] king deserted him.”

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I cento passi (*The Hundred Steps*). Produced by Fabrizio Mosca; directed by Marco Tullio Giordana; written by Claudio Fava, Monica Zapelli, and Marco Tullio Giordana. 2000; color; 114 minutes. Distributed in Italy by Istituto Luce.

Marco Tullio Giordana’s film *I cento passi* received the Leone d’oro prize for best screenplay at the Venice Film Festival of 2000, and it is easy to see why. The film is not only a serious study of the life of anti-Mafia crusader Giuseppe Impastato but also a piercing social critique. While historians wince at *Gladiator* and the public sighs over the beauty of *Malena*, Giordana’s film is a lesson in how to make a film from a historical subject.

Giuseppe (Peppino) Impastato, born in 1948 in Cinisi, Sicily, is the son of a local Mafia accomplice. Instead of obeying the Mafia cult of *omertà* (silence) and the biblical injunction to “Honor thy father,” Peppino decides to rebel and, more dangerously, to expose the myriads ways in which the Mafia is intricately woven into Sicilian (and Italian) life, society,

and politics. The film’s title refers to the mere hundred steps that separate the Impastato home from that of Gaetano (Tano) Badalamenti, the notorious Sicilian Mafia lord later arrested and tried in the U.S. on charges of drug trafficking.

The rash Impastato befriends the Communist painter Stefano Venuti and works for the local leftist press. His language is impertinent and hardly subtle: he refers to Cinisi as “Mafiopoli” and runs a headline that reads: “La mafia è una montagna di merda” (“The Mafia is a mountain of shit”). His impatience with the traditional methods of political action is palpable. He breaks with the entrenched Communist Party (which sold out for jobs at the local airport) and joins splinter leftist groups like Lotta continua and Democrazia proletaria. He organizes public demonstrations against the building of the airport, the paving of unnecessary roads, and the construction of *case abusive* (illegally built homes on the beach) that have destroyed Sicily’s magnificent landscape.

Blocked in every public endeavor, Impastato becomes the catalyst in creating a pirate radio station. Here is where he and his movement prove most effective and therefore dangerous. The entire town listens to the radio broadcasts, including Tano Badalamenti. Peppino’s father, Luigi Impastato, who, like so many others, owes his livelihood to the local Mafia chieftain, is publicly humiliated. And therein lies the double tragedy of the story, for it is Luigi and not his son who represents the daily tragedy of life tied to organized crime. Luigi Impastato is a sympathetic character, and the Oedipal scene where he confronts Peppino, desperately pleading that his son “Honor thy father,” is a heart-wrenching moment. Luigi’s ties to Badalamenti are also the only thing that protect the brash young man. When Luigi is “accidentally” killed by an automobile and Peppino decides to run for the City Council, his fate is sealed.

Giuseppe Impastato was assassinated on May 9, 1978. His death, however, was overshadowed by the discovery in Rome—midway between the offices of the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and those of the Italian Communist Party—of the body of former prime minister and DC leader Aldo Moro. Moro had been kidnapped, tried, and executed by the Red Brigades in what was the most outrageous act of political terrorism committed by the extreme left (the extreme right, not to be outdone in barbarism, carried out its own terrorism, usually aimed at civilians). With the more spectacular national event as cover, the Sicilian authorities—closely tied to the intricate web of organized crime on the island—first ruled Peppino’s death a suicide, recalling the “accidental death” of the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli (made famous by Dario Fo’s play *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* [1977]). They later implied that Impastato died while attempting a terrorist bombing, recalling the death of the publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.

Giordana has directed a somber, realistic film. He effectively uses an eclectic soundtrack, incorporating

everything from traditional Sicilian folk melodies to pop-culture classics, to evoke the sentiments of the late 1960s and 1970s. Most of the actors are trained in the theater, and the effect is reminiscent of the great neorealist films of the immediate postwar era.

The film's palette is almost unrelentingly dark; the camera seems to seek refuge in the cool interior of Sicily's houses, but there it finds only the evil that lurks behind the island's sunny facades. The faces in the films are facades as well. Contrary to the popular culture stereotype, Sicilians are by nature reserved and reticent. The camera captures brilliantly the extremely subtle facial expressions in social settings: at a family gathering, at a funeral, or when Badalamenti pays a menacing visit to the Impastato pizzeria to "settle accounts" with Peppino.

I cento passi comes dangerously close to hagiography, and indeed the Christ imagery is compelling but not overwrought. Giordana's Impastato may defy his father, but he loves his mother; he reads Miguel Cervantes and Pier Paolo Pasolini after his father throws him out of the family home. Yet it is difficult not to sanctify Impastato. At a time when *omertà* was the rule, he managed to move his fellow Sicilians out of a millennial apathy.

We now have a substantial body of scholarly work on the Mafia, notably including Pino Arlacchi's *Mafia*

Business: The Mafia Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1986), Alexander Stille's *The Mafia and the Death of the First Republic* (1995), and Nicola Tranfaglia's *Mafia, politica, e affari nell'Italia repubblicana, 1943-1991* (1992). Yet *I cento passi* holds out the hope of doing for the anti-Mafia movement in Italy what *Schindler's List* did for a wider public consciousness of the Holocaust. It is that rare thing: both a box-office and a critical success, and it has been shown in schools and to civic associations across Italy. Furthermore, it is grounded in personal experiences: screenwriter Claudio Fava's own father, a journalist, was killed by the Mafia in 1984.

Impastato's death marked an important moment in the struggle against organized crime in Sicily. He was elected posthumously to the city council. A documentation center, the Centro di Documentazione "Giuseppe Impastato" (www.centroimpastato.it), was later founded. It assisted in the making of the film and continues to keep alive that small flame of indignation which will be necessary to eradicate organized crime from Italian society. In 1997, nearly twenty years after Impastato's death, Badalamenti was officially charged with organizing his murder; as of April 2001, his trial was still under way.

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