

Towards a Political Economy of Italian Competitive Festivals

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In Central Italy a recurrent feature of popular festivals is an event entailing competition among territorial or other divisions within the urban-centered polity. The Palio of Siena and the Ceri of Gubbio are of particular interest because they have historical continuity of several centuries and because they exhibit contrasting versions of the general pattern: competition in the Palio being among territorial units (*contrade*), while in the Ceri it is among occupational categories. The elaborate cultural forms of such festivals have invited interpretation emphasizing their symbolic meaning, but they must also be understood as political-economic phenomena. The hypothesis that the territorial pattern has the effect of impeding class-based alliances is examined in the light of historical evidence on Siena, and in relation to the multiplication of territorial festivals in the twentieth century. Comparison with Gubbio suggests that occupational competition has a similar effect of supporting the social order, but through a different mechanism.

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Like many areas of Western Europe, Central Italy has seen a revitalization of popular festivals in recent decades. In one hilltop town after another, on the appointed day, the urban center is transformed into its preferred image of its past. The historic architecture comes alive with people in costume, and a succession of spectacles unfolds: elaborate processions, flag-throwing feats, displays of emblems and traditions of different kinds, and frequently, as the climax, a competitive game or performance employing historic skills or customs. Some participants and observers accept the trappings of the events as demonstrating historical continuity and local tradition, while others more cynical see the festivals merely as fabrications geared to the tourist market. Yet neither view is adequate. These festivals pose problems not only of ethnographic description and historical reconstruction but also of explanation. Ultimately, I believe, that task demands an approach that joins ethnography, history, and social science.

The renewed interest in popular festivals is,

of course, widespread, but the Central Italian festivals tend to take a particular form: they often feature competition among territorial or other divisions within the urban-centered unit, phrased in an ideology emphasizing the civic identity of the overarching unit and of the divisions within it. A cursory survey I have conducted identified at least seventy such events in contemporary Italy. Despite the appearances of historical depth, however, in only a very few instances does the festival have an uninterrupted history extending back beyond the last fifty years or so. Two of these exceptional cases – the Palio of Siena and the Ceri of Gubbio – make a particularly useful contrast, since they reveal two versions of the general pattern: Siena's festival being based on competition among territorial units, or *contrade*, and Gubbio's festival entailing competition among occupational groups, historically organized as corporations.

The elaborate cultural forms of these festivals have invited ethnographic interpretations focussing on their internal logic or sym-

bolic meaning. For example, three anthropological analyses of the Palio have attempted to deduce, through ethnographic observation, the symbolism of the festival: one using a combination of psychoanalytic and Lévi-Straussian terminology (Dundes and Falassi 1975), a second using a Geertzian concept of "cultural performance" (Logan 1978), a third addressing the internal logic of the festival as a "template" (Handelman 1983). Alternatively, however, the festivals may also be approached as political-economic phenomena. The object of this paper is to provide an illustration of the usefulness of that approach. It pursues one hypothesis, which emerged out of initial work on Siena: that the territorial pattern of festival competition, by underlining internal social divisions that crosscut, bypass, or obscure the lines of strategic class interests, has the effect of impeding class-based alliances. This hypothesis, among others, guided a comparative study of the two "type cases" of Siena and Gubbio, which combined historical and ethnographic methods.

Siena

The Palio of Siena is a horse race run twice each summer, on July 2nd and August 16th, by the seventeen contrade, neighborhoods or wards within the walls of the city. The prize is a painted banner (the *palio*) dedicated to the Virgin. Although the race itself lasts only a few minutes, each Palio consists of an elaborate series of events – rituals, feasts, formal procedures, and political arrangements – that extend over a period of weeks preceding and following it. The main performance begins with an elaborate procession in the great city square, in which symbols of the contrade, the city, and the glorious history of Siena are presented. Ten contrade run in each palio; the horses are assigned by lot, and the jockeys are outsiders hired, like mercenaries, by the individual contrade. The race is essentially a competition among the contrade carried out through a politics of alliance, negotiation, and quasi-military tactics. The major device is the *partiti* – deals between contrade and jockeys, between contrade, and between jockeys – which can assume byzantine complexity.

The contrade, the structural basis of the Palio, are territorial units with fixed boundaries, corporate in nature, with a formal political-administrative organization. Each has a distinctive identity represented by a totemic symbol, most of them animal figures. An individual typically takes on the contrada identity of a parent, is baptized into the contrada, and belongs to it for life. The contrade are a major focus of recreational and festive life the year round, but their most important function, and the primary instrument of their continuity, is the Palio.

A fuller description of the Palio and a first effort towards explanation have been published elsewhere (Silverman 1979). In that preliminary work the Palio-contrada complex was seen as emerging out of the social and political transformations entailed in the expansion and consolidation of the territorial state of Tuscany, and as having functions for the neutralization of class-based alliances. The first aspect of that analysis suggested that competitive festivals like the Palio developed in a context in which there were state interests in strengthening the units that compete in festivals. That suggestion was borne out in subsequent historical work on Siena tracing the Palio-contrada complex over time: the emergence of the totemic contrade at the end of the fifteenth century, their increasing festival role under Medici sponsorship following the Florentine conquest of Siena in the mid-sixteenth century, and the mutual development of Palio and contrade from the mid-seventeenth century appearance of the modern Palio through the eighteenth-century consolidation of the seventeen present-day contrade into the contemporary period.

The historical material on the transformation of public festivals in sixteenth-century Siena supported the notion that the Medici princes fostered the contrade as allies in their task of dismantling the commune, in a manner similar to the process described by Richard Trexler (1980) for Florence. Siena's major festival was, and is, the Assumption, the August celebration of the city's patroness, the Virgin. Under the Republic (1260–1555), the festival had served as a demonstration of the political



Fig. 1. The Palio: the horses take off from the starting rope. Two jockeys have already fallen. (Photo: Gielle, Siena).

supremacy of the Siennese state, dramatizing the submission of the hundred-odd dependent communities of the Republic through the ritual offering of wax at the Cathedral of Siena. Organized by the civic administration, the festival was a statement of Siena's dependency upon no power other than the Virgin herself, and all the constituent groups within the Republic were represented, including variously defined territorial units of the city. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, *contrade* (local groups now appearing in festival contexts under totemic emblems) had often staged races or games, but they had a subordinate role within the festival. Then, following the defeat of the Republic, Cosimo I ordered that the commune of Siena and the communities formerly subject to it make their offerings of wax at the Cathedral of Florence, on the festival of its patron San Giovanni. Si-

ena's own festival was allowed to continue as a religious devotion to the Virgin, but the political expressions of Siennese autonomy were forbidden. At the same time, *contrada*-organized bullfights and races were called for, and presented as part of the homage paid to Cosimo and his representatives. The *contrada* events increasingly became central to the festival, while the commune as a political entity was represented only as a shell. The *contrade* aided the public glorification of the Medici, while also taking on the identity of distinctively Siennese "statelets", enacting the cultural forms of autonomy – a kind of mimicry of the autonomy that Siena no longer possessed.

The evidence suggested, however, that the Siennese nobility had as much a stake in the *contrade* as did the Florentine rulers. The interest of the local upper class in the *contrade* pointed up the second component of the origi-

nal argument, which proposed that the contrade might have functioned to crosscut and thereby neutralize class alignments. Further study led to the hypothesis that such a function occurs in territorial festivals in general.

Early on each contrada had prominent Sieneese among its "protectors", who lent financial support to the contrada and were its representatives in dealing with outside authorities. With little occupational segregation in residence patterns within the city, the contrade were multiclass territorial divisions. Each one incorporated the full range of socioeconomic diversity, and in each the protectors retained dominance, which went along with an ideology of egalitarianism and patterns of cross-class intimacy within the contrada.

From various clues in the documents, it would appear that the contrada organization of the city had the implicit effect of creating a counterforce against class-based alliances, as well as providing an explicit form of celebration of the current political order. Virtually every government of Siena was supportive of the contrade and saw them as a stabilizing force. The contrade took on their corporate organization under the Medici, achieving inviolable legal status by act of the Governess in 1729. The succeeding administration of the Dukes of Lorraine underwrote the contrade by granting them properties expropriated from the religious confraternities, suppressed in 1784. The French governors of the Napoleonic period were sympathetic to the contrade and gave their permission for the Palio to continue, while banning other public events. During the turmoils of 1847-1848 the government used the contrade to mediate relations with the population, constituting a "political circle" in each contrada.

The implications of the contrada structure for class relations in Siena in the late nineteenth century can be detected in the history of mutual aid societies in Siena (see Cherubini 1967 for a comprehensive study based upon the local press during the period 1860-1893). In 1861, when mutual aid societies were being organized throughout Italy, a Sieneese society was founded; however, it remained a multiclass organization in the control of the local up-

per class, who ensured that political activity was excluded. In subsequent years, a series of mutual aid societies was constituted within trade groups. Several of the contrade followed suit with societies of their own. Generally, the upper-class members of the contrada held the positions of leadership, and they succeeded in maintaining a spirit of "interclassismo" and in preventing any form of political infiltration.

A sampling of newspaper sources from the mid-nineteenth century on reveals that, in general, the contrade were (and are) regarded as apolitical and, as such, rarely a subject of political debate. The exceptions, however, are instructive. In the liberal press during the 1870s, there appeared attacks on the aristocrats and priests who were said to be using some contrade for their own purposes, and calls for the enlightened bourgeois leadership of the contrade to encourage more "civilized" ways among the populace. In the left-wing local press, explicit criticism of the contrade could be found only in one brief period, 1905-1910, when a series of editorials depicted the contrade as means whereby the "signori" exploit the workers and keep them divided. Significantly, in the years following both world wars, when the political polemic was at its most intense, references to the contrade are uniformly enthusiastic and affectionate.

The rise of Fascism represented a crisis for some of the contrade, as the government decreed that the contrada societies were to be absorbed under the official organization of the Dopolavoro (an agency created to manage leisure-time activities of the population). Many of the societies took on the new guise, but others chose to dissolve themselves rather than yield their autonomy. (Ironically, the Fascist regime, which systematically attempted to revive or invent folklore, seeking to represent itself as the champion of popular culture, could not tolerate the real thing.) Once they were domesticated, however, the contrade became favored symbols for the regime, and contrada displays were frequently enlisted in its public glorification.

After World War II, the left gained administrative control of the commune and province of Siena, numerically dominated by the agri-



Fig. 2. Victory: the contrada of the Goose claims the *palio* from the judges' stand. (Photo: Gielle, Siena).

cultural workers of the rural districts beyond the city walls, but no local administration, then or since, has ever wavered in its commitment to Palio and contrade. Local political leaders of all parties are unanimous in defining these institutions as "Sienese" in an almost mystical sense and beyond political differences. Put another way, the common absorption in the Palio, like the alignments of people by contrade, cuts across political differences and to some extent sets them aside. At least during Palio season, it is the politics internal to the Palio that domi-

nates Siena, while the city remains almost aloof from the polemic of "larger" politics.

The survival of the contrade throughout the vicissitudes of Sienese and Italian politics over four centuries, indeed their favored status under one political order after another, derives, I think, from their combination of structural and symbolic characteristics. On the one hand, they were rarely seen as a threat; not only did their multiclass makeup underwrite the *status quo*, but their very localism and appearance of autonomy made them ready symbols of the

popular will, whose support could be valuable. On the other hand, they offered a treasury of symbolic material, which could lend itself to a multitude of purposes. Their color combinations, numerology, mythology, and customs could be attached to a great variety of meanings, and the contrade as such could represent the Sienese soul, civic liberty, resistance to the Florentines, democracy and popular initiative, law and order, familism, love of country, or any number of the ideals emphasized by different political programs.

Yet one might still question Siena's uniqueness among the cities of Central Italy: what is it about Siena that accounts for the uninterrupted continuance there of the Palio-contrade complex? I believe at least a part of the answer is in the presence of the great Monte dei Paschi bank, founded in 1472, a major international bank since the seventeenth century, and in recent years ranking among the fifty or so largest banks in the world. It was the wealth of the bank that underwrote the costs of the Palio, whether indirectly through the noble protectors of the contrade or directly through grants to the commune and the contrade.

The seat of Monte dei Paschi's far-reaching network of operations has always been city of Siena. The bank wove its public image inextricably with the image of Siena, especially the prime symbol of Siena, the Palio; and the Palio served the bank as well. The Palio attracted the most stellar visitors from throughout Europe and afforded advantageous connections for the Sienese upper class, most of them linked to the bank. The value of such connections went beyond prestige; they translated into good business as Monte dei Paschi forged its expansion.

New Festivals

The hypothesis that territorial festival competition was encouraged because of its stabilizing effect in cutting across potential class alliances also receives support from the data on contemporary Italy. This form of competition has been widely adopted, especially in Central Italy; of the seventy-odd competitive festivals I have been able to identify, all but a few involve territorial divisions. Since the 1920s the Sienese

have complained that other cities were modeling new festivals after the Palio, claiming to be reviving medieval festivals of their own and re-discovering or inventing territorial divisions for the purpose.

The revival or creation of territorial festivals had particular force during two periods: first, in the 1930s under Fascism, and then in the postwar years through the 1950s. (Another thrust of inventiveness, which has not yet run its course, occurred in the 1970s as part of efforts to promote tourism.) The Fascists enthusiastically embraced local folkloric traditions (as long as they conformed to official concepts of folklore) and presented themselves as their defenders. Under policy set and implemented by the national Dopolavoro organization, local officials revived or invented popular festivals, many of which incorporated tournaments or other forms of competition among different quarters or neighborhoods. (One official described his innovation as an effort to enliven local ritual through "harmless" competition.)

The postwar sponsorship of new territorial festivals generally came under the auspices of local notables and professionals loosely associated with the center-right coalition led by the Christian Democrats. Their ideology of local identity and civic glory was part of a continuing political rhetoric, implicitly or explicitly challenging the appeal of the left to class interests. Competitive festivals, themselves defined as apolitical, were fostered as emblems of localism and as civic activity that would bring people together as citizens of a city with a proud history. As the units of competition, internal territorial divisions were activated or designated anew. There was not necessarily a self-conscious political strategy in this. However, as local groups attempted to create civic festivals, the idea of using territorial divisions as an organizational principle was able to enlist wide support precisely because these were usually divorced from any lines of real interests.

Gubbio

The Umbrian town of Gubbio offers a case of festival competition of the contrasting type, in which the competing units are nonlocalized so-



Fig. 3. The race of the three Ceri. (Photo: Rossi, Gubbio).

cial or economic categories. Its major festival, the Festa dei Ceri, engages in competition three groups identified by occupation: masons, small-merchants (a category extended to arti-

sans in general), and agricultural workers. The main event of the festival on May 15th is a race in which teams of men from the three groups carry the Ceri, great candle-shaped wooden

structures topped by statues of their respective patron saints. The three Ceri follow a fixed order of precedence: Sant'Ubaldo, the masons' patron first, San Giorgio patron of the artisans second, and Sant'Antonio patron of agriculturalists last. The masons are formally organized as a corporation of members of the building trades, which is the custodian and principal organizer of the festival. This corporate form has direct continuity with the medieval guilds. The festival, in fact, derives from a medieval procession in honor of Gubbio's patron saint, in which all the guilds participated. The guilds of the stoneworkers, the small-merchants, and the muleteers had the obligation of carrying special offerings, which are antecedents of the modern Ceri.

The race is a ferocious run up and down the steep streets of the town, culminating in a long stretch up the mountain that rises above Gubbio, to the basilica where the patron saint is buried and where the Ceri reside throughout the year. Since the three Ceri always remain in their appointed order, the race consists not in getting ahead of the others but in "running well", smoothly and without falls, and in getting as close as possible to the Cero ahead while keeping as much distance as possible from the Cero behind. The competition among the saints' groups is vivid, yet there is also a unity among them, a spirit of brotherhood and harmony that surpasses competition. The three saints form a hierarchy, which is not to be violated; but they also form a division of labor, and the competitiveness among their followers is ultimately complementarity. Together they stand for the unity of Gubbio.

As in the relationship between Palio and contrade in Siena, Gubbio's festival must be understood in terms of its structural underpinning, the corporation. The corporation historically was by no means an organization of equals within the labor force. Each corporation included a wide range of occupations and statuses; the effect of the institution was, in fact, to multiply the variety of occupational identities and emphasize the status distinctions within a trade and among trades. The corporation was rigidly hierarchical, and its statutes protected that hierarchy. Thus, far from en-

couraging workers' alliances, the corporation acted to replicate and sustain the class order. The basic concern of the corporation was protection of its trade monopoly. To this end, it was also a guardian of standards in its sector. The corporation of the masons continues to have the same function in contemporary Gubbio. To reach the grade of *capomastro* means to have achieved the highest level of mastery of the ancient building skills – skills that are still essential, since building in Gubbio is largely the restoration of medieval structures. But to be a *capomastro* also means embracing the privileges and obligations of leadership (captainhood) of the Ceri. That status, in turn, is a public affirmation of professional merit.

What, then, does the case of Gubbio suggest about the implications of the organization of competitive festivals by occupational category, in contrast to territorially-based competition? Contrary to my original expectation, this pattern does not have the effect of underlining class-based alliances. Much less than lending itself to political mobilization, the occupational sodality of the corporation is defined as "absolutely" apolitical; when we enter the door of the corporation, the members say, we leave politics outside. Indeed, it is hierarchy – within the corporation and among the three corporations – that finds expression in the festival. The Ceri, in their fixed order of precedence, become an ideological statement that the social order consists of a division of labor arranged hierarchically, but integrated through fraternal collaboration and a common identity with Gubbio and its beloved patron saint. Thus, the Gubbio comparison indicates that the pattern of festival competition by social category does not contrast with the territorial pattern but rather has a similar effect – that of supporting the social order – but through a different mechanism.

The Ceri festival has been replicated elsewhere by emigrants from Gubbio, including a group who settled in the United States in Jessup, Pennsylvania and have run the Ceri there since 1907. However, the pattern of competition among social categories is not easily transferred, and the only instances where it appears in contemporary Italy is in a few communities,

mostly in peripheral areas, where there are ceremonial remnants of corporations. Were this festival model to be copied elsewhere today, the structures that would logically accommodate it would be the contemporary labor organizations – the unions, the confederations, or the political parties based on them. Clearly, this has not happened. Organized labor in Italy makes use of festivals but the model is the all-embracing “Festival of Unity”, not the competitive festival. Categorical competition, setting off true interest groups against each other, would be as inimical to the Italian left as it would be to the protectors of the established order.

Conclusion

The mode of analysis illustrated in this paper neither explains the cultural forms of festivals nor captures their aesthetic and emotional quality. It suggests, rather, that cultural forms are not merely texts to be “read” but must also be accounted for in terms of the political-economic contexts in which they are forged. Festivals, like other cultural forms, are not arbitrary historical products, nor are they neutral in their effects. They are grounded in

particular social and political-economic structures, which they enter into and affect. Festivals such as those of Central Italy referred to here are cultural performances of enormous complexity, subtlety, and symbolic richness. However, they also take place in historically situated arenas of power and class relations. To lift them out of those arenas in order to “interpret” them in their own terms alone is to miss a vital dimension of understanding.

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