

## **THE CONTRADE, THE PALIO, AND THE *BEN COMUNE*: LESSONS FROM SIENA**

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**Abstract.** Siena's unusually high level of both wealth and social capital and extremely low level of crime make it, in spite of all its specificity, an obvious object of lesson-drawing for other communities. The reason of Siena's success seems to be the historic *contrade* system, which again is closely linked to the famous horse-race, the Palio. Based on recent literature, and corroborated *in situ*, this essay sets out to investigate how the Palio-*contrade* complex works today, what effects and side-effects it has, and what lessons might be drawn from it.

**Keywords:** Siena, *contrade*, Palio, social capital, Monte dei Paschi

### **1. Introduction**

The Italian city republics, especially the Tuscan cities of Florence, Siena, and Lucca, have fascinated intellectuals, scholars, and the culturally interested in general at least since the 19th century. Their aesthetics seem very close to ours (i.e. 21st century 'Western' intellectuals), only on a more sublime level, and their climate, cuisine, and atmosphere make the region the 'Chiantishire' of an ultimate arcadia 'under the Tuscan Sun'. Moreover, these city-states are particularly appealing historically because they seem so democratic, civic, and fairly civilized. And indeed, it is fair to say that they have constituted "a singular experience, without parallel since antiquity, without sequel until the modern age" (Jones 1997:1).

Of these, Siena, still the most Gothic, the most medieval of the three, had already ceased to be a center of power and wealth around 1400, remaining prominent in several fields, but declining completely after 1555, when it became a Medici Florentine fief and, in effect, a colony. For centuries, although there were significant changes during the French Revolution and especially under the Habsburg rulers – still oft-maligned but actually quite productive –, it formed a veritable backwater. Just like with Rye, Williamsburg, or Rothenburg ob der Tauber (or Marburg), this dormant status preserved the medieval city. Yet, two

large-scale and important institutions, the university and a bank, prevented Siena from becoming a completely provincial town. Today, these two, as well as significant pharmaceutical industry, make Siena – which is still on a byway and does not have its own regularly serviced airport, nor even a good highway connection – much more than a tourist town, although tourism is a vital industry.

Siena is probably most renowned today for its genuinely world-famous, biannual horse race, the Palio, in the Piazza del Campo, which is organized by the traditional city quarter associations, the *contrade*,<sup>1</sup> which compete in it. The Palio, surely one of the most exciting races imaginable, has attracted much attention over the centuries, and today does so more than ever. But the *contrade*, too, themselves have always fascinated tourists and scholars alike. For those dealing with social capital, urban policy, neighborhoods, and certainly with political philosophy, they are particularly interesting because Siena appears to be so much of a success story: It is the wealthiest of the Tuscan cities (in an already wealthy area), it has a particularly low crime-rate and, ostensibly, the highest social capital of any city of that size (around 50,000 inhabitants). In fact, the low level of crime was, until very recently, one of the advantages most often mentioned by the Sieneese themselves (Warner 2004:166, 167, 227, 239, 240; Liebscher 2001:46–47, 209; see Park 1992:86, but 91 N33); only during the past five years does the majority of Sieneese feel “quite safe” rather than “very safe” (Figure 1).

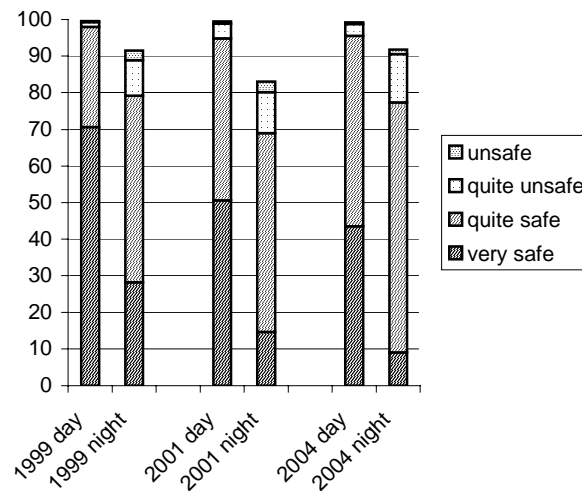


Figure 1. Perception of personal safety in downtown Siena by the Sieneese (*Analisi...* n.d.: 8–10).1

<sup>1</sup> I have capitalized “Palio” and italicized “*contrada*” and its permutations, throughout, even within quotes where originally this was done differently – there is no accepted standard on this, but the practice used here is the most common one.

Still, comparatively speaking, these are extremely high safety perceptions in a university city of 50,000. It should also be noted that the perception may have changed, but that Siena is, for a city of its size, let alone of its demographics and settlement pattern, almost ridiculously safe; the most recent critically reflected crime statistics we have (*Progettare...* 2004:41–76) show, for instance, no murders (of any degree) whatsoever. This safety and protectedness is often seen, by citizens as well as by outsiders, as something created by the *contrade* (Warner 2004:238).

Thus, almost everyone who has sat in an outside restaurant in the historic center on a nice warm day of which Siena has so many, a bit away from the stream of tourists, say in the Fontebranda neighborhood, and has seen two boys practicing flag-throwing in some square to become *alfieri* in the *corteo storico*, the historical parade or procession just before the Palio – a very high aim – (see Warner 2004: 135 N112; Dundes and Falassi 2005:98, 102–104), would register this as idyllic, but observers thinking a bit further will see more than that. Well beyond the usual image of youth as potential juvenile delinquents, their alienation in a small city, the lure of the internet, etc., here, young men who otherwise share the interests of their international peers are engaged in an activity that is at the same time decorative, traditional, athletic, skills- and coordination-oriented, interpersonal (one needs two), outside in the public, and socially valuable. One cannot help but be both impressed and delighted.

In a nutshell, this is what feels ‘right’ about the *contrade*, something that makes Siena an ‘island of the blessed’ (Warner 2004:238) in the sea of a Europe that struggles with precisely those problems of crime, drugs, lost values, and alienation – not to speak of heterogeneity and multiculturalism in general and the difficulty to cope with it. And in Siena, this privileged status does not seem to come at any high cost; the city is wealthy and in many respects – such as e-governance – very modern and very much ‘with it’. Thus, life in Siena seems ideal, like an arcadia if not even a utopia (on the difference see Bloch 1968), and the question presents itself of what we can learn from Siena, and that means from the *contrade* (and, by implication, the Palio) for the organization of urban life in general in the 21st century? Is there, in fact, anything that we can learn, and from which we can draw a lesson?

In order to address that question, before we have to enter into any discussion of the possibility of lesson-drawing, or policy transfer, across space and perhaps time – one may briefly remark that, though probably difficult, this is clearly possible, especially if one allows for adaptations<sup>2</sup> –, we first have to look carefully at the *contrade* from a public and social policy angle, as this is our approach, question, and research context, to find out what the situation really is that appears, on the surface, to be so very nice.

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<sup>2</sup> This essay uses the concepts of lesson-drawing suggested by Rose 1993; on the theory and problems of lesson-drawing and policy transfer see Drechsler 2003a:58–62.

## 2. Sources

Surprisingly enough, such an investigation has not been done very often; research on Siena has been largely limited to a type of social-scientific accounts which, partially by design, partially by accident, have mostly avoided this perspective: “the *contrade* of Siena are a social phenomenon that has intrigued historians, anthropologists and sociologists.” (Parsons 2004:106) The focus of interest has (again, partially therefore) been on the Palio, not on the *contrade*. It matches the interest of popular literature as well, as books on the Palio sell much better, of course; thus, there are books with titles like *The Palio of Siena through the centuries* and the subtitle, *A history of the contrade* (Bindi 2002), although the Palio is hardly mentioned. So, what the current essay sets out to do is to look selectively at the scholarly literature that does exist, which is mostly international – to which is added some, at this point, minor original research for corroboration purposes – and to look for implications for our question.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, two more or less recent publications make a difference, and it was their appearance that originally prompted the current essay. Both studies, which have apparently not entered the general discourse on Siena and the *contrade* so far (probably because they are in German; the discourse is entirely in English or Italian), are worth ‘mining’ in our context because they provide new and timely insight, fresh empirical evidence and, partially, analysis that is simply not available elsewhere but highly important for our question. They are surprisingly similar from a formal point of view, because both are PhD theses in anthropology written by women at Northern German universities. Anna-Kathrin Warner (2004) has specifically studied the *contrade* (with the subtitle, “local traditions and global change”), and Sandra Liebscher (2001) the Siena city council between 1993 and 1997, devoting a very substantial part (56–99) of the book to the *contrade*.<sup>4</sup> Both work – if for different purposes – with semi-structured, anonymized interviews which, in spite of their small number (which in Liebscher’s case is justified

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<sup>3</sup> Since this is a topic that lives from personal experience, and since all publications make reference to direct communication with Sieneese inhabitants – ranging from unspecified background talks to highly formalized, structured interviews –, I should say at this point that the present essay is informed by various study visits to Siena since 1993, including one, in 2000, to study Lorenzetti (see Drechsler 2001), the close observation of the August Palio of 2004, and various interviews with Sieneese people, who were either outsiders or, more often, *contradaioli*, in February-March 2006, when I went to Siena especially for research on this essay. The interviewees remain, as is customary on this topic, anonymous, and my talks remained unformalized, nor were they meant to be representational. In fact, they are little more than impressionistic, almost like the proverbial taxi driver conversation, but they have proven to be very helpful and enlightening; the essay is distinctively different because of them.

<sup>4</sup> Liebscher’s thesis, which draws on network analysis and “cognitive ethnology”, seems only available, but with open access, as a pdf download. It fails, in my opinion, as a PhD thesis (or book) because it consists mainly of two completely separate and not at all interwoven parts, with the exception of the 3½ page segment (of 223) of the *giustizia paliesca* (99–102; see 212). The thesis ends with a correctly-titled “summary” (207–223), not a conclusion, so that the results of the research are not even tied together in the very end.

because they are city council members), makes for interesting impressions. Both place Siena and its institutions into context – Liebscher into that of Italian party politics, Warner into that of globalization – which generally is not done, either.

Among the most important older contributions to the study of Siena, two authors have a focus particularly useful for our purpose. The eminent American anthropologist Sydel Silverman takes a specific, historically-grounded, yet present-day focused approach with an interest in social and political questions (e.g., 1979, 1985 and especially 1989). Hamish Park is one of the very few ‘proper’ sociologists who have entered the discourse; his essay (1992) stands out both for focusing on the *contrade* and not the Palio, and for being the only one such contribution that I would call critical (of the ‘Myth’ of the Palio-*contrade* complex). The excellent and realistic essay is occasionally quoted but, as far as I can see, not generally appreciated in its significance.

On the other side, there is the standard anthropological book on the Palio, a work by the late Alan Dundes and by Alessandro Falassi (2005), probably the most popular text on the Palio with a scholarly claim. Thirty years after its first appearance and essentially still with the same text, it is now out in the second edition of a new, local edition. It can be found in multiple copies in literally every bookshop in Siena, and Falassi is the doyen of local Palio-*contrade* studies. Silverman on the one side and Dundes and Falassi on the other represent two poles of how to approach the Palio anthropologically, and they comment, partially vitriolically, on each other in their texts. Finally, a recent book by Gerald Parsons on *Siena, Civil Religion and the Siennese* (2004), strongly emphasizes the ritualistic aspect, and is emotionally very involved in Siena and its culture.

For this topic, a triple hermeneutical problem presents itself right now: First, as this is an essay intended primarily for the non-Siena-expert, both the *contrade* and the Palio need to be introduced. Both are extremely intertwined, yet, one simply has to be introduced before the other, which, it would seem, is impossible. I will introduce first the *contrade* and then the Palio, because we are interested in the latter only because of the former.

The second problem is that ideally, one would have to start with a ‘tourist’ image of both Palio and *contrade*, then move on to a report of the scholarly discussion about them, and finally comment on the issues oneself – because I think that both phenomena need re-evaluation, as the scholarly analysis so far, partially due to the lack of a socio-political perspective, has several flaws. This, however, would make the essay not only repetitive and tedious, it would also be impossible, because, for instance, already the classification of what a *contrada* is, is a significant act of interpretation, as we will see. Therefore, we proceed with the discussion in such a way that interpretation of both facts and scholarship are already part of the display – as little as possible and as much as necessary –, and that subsequently, recent scholarly insights are discussed, followed by some additional analysis.

Third, in spite of all the impossibility of scholarly objectivity, as a heuristic attitude, this is especially called for when dealing with the Palio-*contrade*

complex, because Siena is so seductive, and hardly any scholar would study it without some initial sympathy – and if it was not initial, it would surely come after the first Palio or dinner with some *contradaioli* friends. Critical voices, on the other hand, sometimes seem to be based on disappointment and frustration with the *contrade*, especially after the author has realized that she is, at best, a tolerated guest. But without some personal involvement, it is simply impossible to gather enough relevant information. Having much sympathy for the *contrade* (and especially the Onda) myself, I have nevertheless tried to stay as detached as possible – too detached, surely, by traditional Sienese standards, and not sufficiently so by general scholarly ones, but so be it.

### 3. The *contrade*

#### 3.1. The organization

The *contrade* – neighborhoods, quarters, wards, as they are called in translation – form, in a felt and on many levels real way, the 17 sub-units of historic, i.e. old-town Siena, the old city within the city walls. They differ in size, and there are just a few places, such as the Piazza del Campo, some churches such as the Cathedral, and certain roads, that are non-*contrade*. Each *contrada* has its specific totemic symbol – usually an animal –, a coat of arms, colors, motto, patron saint or holy event, feast days, etc. As just two examples for illustration, Onda (wave – an untypical name as it is not that of the symbol) and Aquila (eagle), see Table 1.

The origin of the *contrade* is slightly obscure – they might have evolved from medieval neighborhood military companies and/or social organizations that arranged feasts and celebrations (see Silverman 1979:421–424). Their affiliation with specific occupations (which dominated the respective neighborhood) is rather tenuous and mostly historical. What is certain is that only in 1729 did the *contrade* acquire their present shape and number through an edict of which we do not know how prescriptive or empirical it was, given by the Governess of Siena, Princess

**Table 1. Onda and Aquila, just two examples.**

	Onda	Aquila
Full name	<i>Contrada Capitana dell'Onda</i>	<i>Nobile Contrada dell'Aquila</i>
Animal	Dolphin	Eagle
Colors	Pale blue and white	Yellow
Motto	<i>Il colore del cielo, la forza del mare</i>	<i>Unguibus et Rostris – Dell'Aquila il rostro, l'ugna e l'ala</i>
Patron saint	Visitation	Holy Name of Mary
Profession	Carpenters	Notaries
Friends	Nicchio, Tartuca, Valdimontone	Civetta, Drago
Enemy	Torre	Pantera
(Lucky) Number	16	60

Violante of Bavaria.<sup>5</sup> Partially as an effect of this consolidation (Silverman 1979: 425–426), the *contrade* organized themselves, and additionally, especially in the 19th century, became mutual aid organizations as well, which have a long tradition in Italy. Today, precisely this is still their focus: Palio organization, social entertainment, and mutual aid provision. (Liebscher 2001:81, 86; Dundes and Falassi 2005:35) The *contrade* are now doubtless “the basic reference point for social interaction within the city.” (Silverman 1979:416; see Warner 2004:164)

What is important – and this is something that is often missed, or wrongly deemphasized, in the scholarly literature – is that the *contrade* are NGO’s (non-governmental organizations), not part of the city administration.<sup>6</sup> They are not even sponsored by the *comune*; rather, they are financed mainly by donations, contributions by patrons, and fees. Between city and *contrade*, there is “mutual recognition.” (Warner 2004:164)

All *contrade* are internally administered in the same way, with a special seat, the *seggio*, with a chosen governing body under, usually, a *priore*; during ‘war time’, i.e. the Palio, just as in the Siena Republic, there was a special government under a *capitano* that is only focused on winning the Palio (this is, in the end, a Roman arrangement). Each *contrada* has a *società*, a social organization, which owns a club house of large proportions, both for celebrations and for regular meetings and just for dropping by. It is important that not only the *società*, but already the *contrada* as such, is actually a social organization – it can be said that the *società* is the everyday arm of the *contrada*. The *contrade* own property, especially houses, both inside and outside the city walls. (On *contrada* vs. *società*, see Liebscher 2001:61–62; on the organization in general, Logan 1978:47–50)

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<sup>5</sup> For antiquarian interest, and because it is not always clear outside of very specialized literature – and that includes Palio-*contrade* scholarship (see even Silverman 1979:425) –, it will be mentioned here that Violante Beatrix (Beatrice) of Bavaria (1673–1731) was the daughter of the Elector of Bavaria, wife of Francesco (‘III’) de’ Medici, the Heir Apparent to Cosimo III, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who outlived his son. Violante had served as First Lady at the Court of Florence until the death of her husband, because her mother-in-law had been banned to a convent near Paris, but when her sister-in-law, the widowed Electress Anna Maria de’ Medici (widow of the Elector Palatinate, the famous “Jan Wellem” of Cologne and Düsseldorf fame), returned to the court as heiress presumptive after her brother Gian Gastone, Violante was created Governess of Siena in 1717 to keep her in Tuscany yet to avoid conflict between the two ladies whose relative rank was somehow unclear. Violante retained that appointment until her death, i.e. also during the reign of Gian Gastone (from 1723), although during that time, she spent more and more time in Florence. While she was by all accounts an enlightened aristocrat and not a bad governess – she is still remembered fondly in Siena today – it may be speculated whether she did, in 1729, personally get involved in Siennese affairs such as *contrade* borders anymore, but she was sufficiently interested in this kind of administrative details that it might have been possible. A classic belletristic account of that epoch and the court is Acton (1932).

<sup>6</sup> Liebscher’s claims that they are “legal territorial administrative units” (10), or that they “autonomously administer their area” (96), are therefore wrong, as is the ubiquitous comparison of the *contrade* to “independent states” (Liebscher 2001:58; Dundes and Falassi 2005:29; see Park 1992:77). On the actual relations between *contrade* and *comune*, see Cappelli (2003).

Other than feasts and the Palio, there are regular activities of the *società* by women's groups, specific-age groups, sports groups, etc., with several of them focused on children. In that, the *contrada* serves as an "enlarged house" (Warner 2004:169, Liebscher 2001:76), as a "second family" (Liebscher 2001:10, 80). Even if some caution that this is a thing of the past, something like a self-perpetuating myth (Park 1992:83) may be in order, to a large extent, this is actually still true for those who participate (and more so than in other Italian, let alone other European, cities.)

In addition to 'real life', it is the symbols – coats of arms, colors, etc. – that emphasize and promote the *contrade* identity. The focus on the flag is perhaps the strongest, but the key symbol for the individual is the *fazzoletto* (a square silk scarf with the *contrade* colors and coat of arms, continuously changing in design), received today at one's *contrada* baptism, worn across fashion, gender, age, and status. Warner claims that the *fazzoletto* can today be bought by everyone, everywhere in the city and is often made of polyester and not silk (2004:172), but in my experience, the 'true' *fazzoletti* worn by the *contradaioli* are invariably of silk, and the polyester ones are for tourists; also, it is not so easy to buy the silk ones (outside of Palio time), as there are no shops selling them, and as it has to be done at the individual *contrada*.

The *contrada* accompanies the *contradaiolo* through all significant steps in life and even death, where there is always personal and visual representation of the *contrada* (see Liebscher 2001:72–73, 76–77; Dundes and Falassi 2005:45). And it does help with job provision, contacts, but also with concrete monetary aid in times of need, just like a genuine secondary family, a social welfare state, and a mutual insurance company. In fact, "the modern *contrade* of Siena are marked by an unusually high degree of corporateness, internal organization, and functionality" (Silverman 1989:234). A higher level of bonding social capital would hardly be imaginable.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2. *Contrada* membership today

However, it is well to realize that a vast majority of Sieneese citizens, at least 60% – doubtless much less among the functional elite, but still – are not *contradaioli*. (Warner 2004:277) This is partially because the *contrade* are primarily a spatial phenomenon, and today, the vast majority of citizens – the overall number was declining since the 1970s until very recently – live outside of the city walls, i.e. outside of the area of the *contrade* (Figure 2).

The reasons for this are the growth of the city as a whole according to demographic trends, and the high prices of downtown living. This is why the problem of finding affordable living space downtown is seen as one of the key problems for

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of social capital used here, and the simple dichotomy between bonding and bridging forms, heuristically particularly helpful for our investigation, is classically based on Putnam; Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen:1–10.



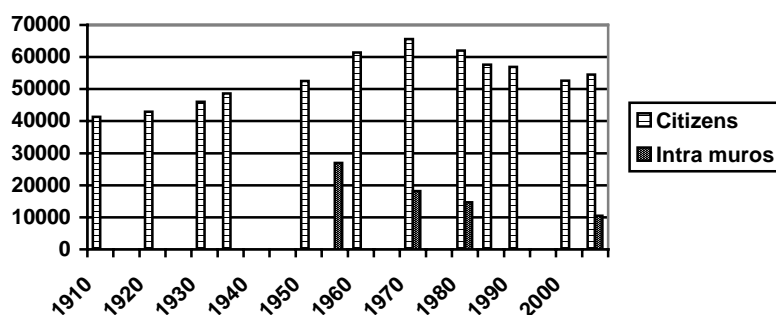


Figure 2. Inhabitants of Siena, overall and *intra muros*, 1905–2005<sup>8</sup>

Siena and the *contrade*.<sup>9</sup> Projects to simply extend the *contrade* to the new areas have failed so far, partially perhaps because they would privilege those *contrade* situated next to the city walls only, but the discussion remains. (See Ceccarelli 2000: esp. 68–75) On the other hand, it seems that most residents living on classic *contrada* territory likewise are not members either.

As a reaction, by now the *ius soli* that used to determine *contrada* membership has largely been replaced, or better supplemented, by the *ius sanguini* as regards *contrade* membership, i.e. *contrade* will generally not refuse a new child as *contradaiolo* if one parent is also *della contrada* (see Liebscher 2001:67–68; Silverman 1989:225). The new ritual of a secular baptism in the *contrada* fountain, where the new *contradaiola* receives the *fazzoletto* and a scroll certifying her membership, has served as a way to clearly ascribe belonging (see Liebscher

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.comune.siena.it/main.asp?id=1242>; Warner 2004:76; Liebscher 2001:24. Data are incomplete.

<sup>9</sup> Often the university is blamed for this (taking away space by buildings, and by student housing as a competition, as students can pay competitive apartment prices), which is actually very unusual for university towns and clearly connected with Siena's position as a non-traditional (if ancient) university town in which the university, important as it is, is not well liked (Warner 2004:231), quite beyond the usual town and gown tensions. But unlike classic university towns, where the university sets the tone, students in Siena are seen, together with tourists, as the main group of foreigners, the main 'other' – and because the city is very strong culturally, one does not have to 'borrow' one's identity from the university either. Besides, many students come from the *mezzogiorno* and as such are sometimes not welcome (and recognizable). (Warner 2004:232; Liebscher 2001:25–26) Objectively, there are very many students (24,000 according to Warner 2004; 17,500 in 1994 according to Liebscher 2001:25–26, in a city of 50,000), so there really is a problem, given that there are less people living in downtown Siena than there are students. On the relations between *comune*, *contrade* and the University, see Baccetti 1993, and especially Falassi 1993, although neither is very insightful.

2001:70–72).<sup>10</sup> Today, this is also possible for newcomers to Siena who were not born there.

Silverman and Park, importantly – and unaddressed by the other scholars – have pointed out that the rise of *contrada* activity that one can witness for the second half of the 20th century is precisely another reaction to deterritorialization, emphasizing not the life in the *contrada* but the special activities there. They think that this has been extremely successful (Silverman 1989:232; Park 1992:78), and in the end one can only agree with them – after all, it is surprising how well everything works.

### 3.3. Away from Siena

#### 3.3.1. The diffusion of power

The focus on the *contrade* as regards identity naturally had an effect of diffusing attention to Siena as an (independent) city, as well as on leveling class differences as a focus of politics. Whether one sees this as either good or bad depends on one’s political-philosophical outlook, as well as on one’s position and involvement. To diffuse attention away from Siena as a *polis* was, of course, something that foreign rulers would like – as Silverman has said, and as has been much quoted, there is an inverted proportionality between the creation of units within a community and the power of that unit on the municipal level (1979:423; 1989:235). In other words, the *contrade* are *prima facie* the mightier the weaker the *comune* is, and the other way round.

In that sense, we would indeed suspect “that the *contrade* are less remnants of the Middle Ages” (of the Sienese republic) but rather originate from later times (Warner 2004:83); we would have to detect an increase of the importance of the *contrade* since the Medici conquest of 1555. And in fact, as Silverman convincingly argues, the *contrade* organization as we know it is from the Medici time (1979:425–426; 1985:98).<sup>11</sup> “Then, the defeat of Siena reduced the *comune* to an administrative arm of the territorial state that Cosimo I was constructing. It is precisely in this context that the modern *contrade* emerged and subsequently developed corporate form and internal structure” (1989:235). So, it seems that the

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<sup>10</sup> As Park (1992) narrates the story, the building of the Sienese suburbs, with the breaking of the walls, both in the 1920s and 1930s, changed that and extended Siena into the old “peasant” area that one had looked down on (80). But life still happened in Siena for all inhabitants; the suburbs did not become autonomous villages (81). So, the move to switch to the *ius sanguini* (something Park said had been reserved before for noble patrons; 81–82) was to include those living outside (81) – and this would have soon included many children and young families from the *contrade*. The immigration wave, and population growth, of the 1970s and 1980s, however, brought people from other areas, especially the South, with different accents (82). Thus, a mixture of *ius soli* and *ius sanguini* (and of ‘feeling *contrade*’) was developed, which clearly meant one could exclude those not ‘really’ belonging (82).

<sup>11</sup> Silverman (1989:230–231) points out that the property of the *contrade* stems from the times of a secularization of church property in Tuscany by the reform-minded Grand Duke Peter Leopold of Tuscany in 1784. Even if indirectly, this again shows an endorsement of the Tuscan government of the *contrade*.

Medici supported the *contrade* primarily in order to diffuse Siennese patriotism to them (and to keep them entertained) (Warner 2004:82–83), much like the European Union is promoting regions in order to weaken the member states. We will have to get back, however, to the question of ‘unity through diversity’.

### 3.3.2. *Interclassismo*

Second, by being spatial – and as the neighborhoods of Siena are not strongly socially differentiated –, the *contrade* unite everyone who lives there, ‘from aristocrat to pauper’ (Warner 2004:78; Dundes and Falassi 2005:35; even Park 1992:86).<sup>12</sup> This “*interclassismo*”, Silverman suggests, was also in the interest of the outside rulers, as the *contrade* form “a seventeen-way division of class interests” (1989:235–236, 236; 1979:427–428).<sup>13</sup> They “contain the full range of social and economic differentiation within the city. Thus, they crosscut the lines of strategic class interests, the lines of potential class alliances.” (1989:235) The *contrade* serve as an equalizing structure socially in which all *contradaioi* are equal; they therefore serve to prevent class warfare.

On the one hand, this is of course a good thing. On the other, if we assume that not all given systems are ‘good’ and that political stability is by no means desirable in all circumstances, then it becomes obvious how much the *contrade* structure – and, as we will see, by implication the Palio – is “*Ablenkung vom Klassenkampf*” [distraction from class struggle], as a (non-Siennese) Marxist would say (and during the few times in history when the Palio was criticized, indeed this was the point; Silverman 1985:98). The *contrade* system does to some degree provide *panem et circenses*. In politics, Silverman says of the *contrade*, “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.” (1985:98) The *contrade* themselves are almost militantly apolitical (1989:234) – but apolitical means of course conservative, if then one is in a political context already.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> There is also another level of in/out, and that is the one within the *contrada*, which is often marked by inner struggle between the generations in spite of the claim to complete unity and equality. (Warner 2004:181–182) And there is the oft-mentioned divide between A-members and B-members, based on the activity in the *contrada* (266–268).

<sup>13</sup> “The *contrada* contains mechanisms for defusing class interests internally. Although the *contrada* is stratified, high-status members are ideologically absorbed by the *contrada*; they are assigned formal positions, and their status is attached to and enhances the identity of the *contrada* as a whole” (Silverman 1979:426).

<sup>14</sup> Liebscher’s aforementioned study of the *giustizia paliesca* (2001:99–102) is interesting because indeed it shows the *contrade-comune* interface. Unfortunately, the material is too thin to be really valuable (including the claim that Palio justice also follows the trend of political left-right divides in the votes, 102). It is important that she claims that part of the protest against the situation that seems to have been current was based, not only on allegations of *contrada* favoritism (which is to be expected in this system), but also on the fact that indeed, here a city institution ‘interferes’ with *contrade* business.

## 4. The Palio

### 4.1. More than just a horse race

“Any inquiry into public life in Siena ... inevitably leads to the Palio” (Silverman 1989:224). The best literary description is probably Fruttero and Lucentini’s mystery novel, *The Palio of the Dead* (1983), but something of a sketch is in order here as well. ‘As everybody knows’, and has been amply foreshadowed, the Palio is the twice-yearly horse race thrice around the Piazza del Campo, in and around which spectators have assembled. There are ten horses allotted by lottery to ten of the 17 *contrade*, determined by previous participation and lottery, ridden by outside jockeys in the *contrade* colors. Earlier one of many types of entertainments, this now happens on 2 July and 16 August every year (in two different cycles, i.e. the July palio series is separate from the August one), and there may be a special Palio for a significant special occasion – such as the end of a war – in a year as well. Ridden as it is now in the Piazza del Campo, it can be traced to the late 18th century only, but the roots are much older.

The race itself begins after the historical procession, the *corteo storico*, a pageant that idealizes Siennese history, i.e. the 1260–1555 Republic, from a Siennese perspective – and that does, as has been pointed out, give outsiders the feeling of a big show event, which the race itself is not. The medieval costumes are not in fact remnants of the past, but they come from changes after the unification of Italy, i.e. the late 19th century, and have been frequently changed towards this direction during the 20th as well, especially in 1928 (Cairola n.d.:12; Silverman 1989:231, 238 N8; Park 1992:79). Park sees the ‘prefacing’ of the Palio with the *corteo storico* (which in older days was more mythological and less Siennese) as purposefully increasing the importance of the former in the context of Siena, as well as the place of the *contrade*, who are thus linked to the old military companies (1992:79–80). However, to strongly focus on the *corteo* might be wrong, because for all the interest it commands; for the Siennese spectator-participants, it serves more as another delay of the race (cf. Cairola n.d.:1).

“The Palio is a ferocious race demanding extraordinary skill of horsemanship on a perilous course; but it is more than that” (Silverman 1989:228). It is a highly complex race with intricate rules, quite violent – jockeys may hit each other, and horses are often seriously hurt and sometimes killed –, and structured in such a way that for the *contradaioli*, it counts as a victory both if one’s own or a friendly *contrada* wins and if the enemy *contrada* loses. Thus, it is possible to win or lose even if one’s *contrada* is not one of the ten participating ones in a given Palio; this makes it of course emotionally and participatorily more interesting.

“*Conta solo vincere. E se non vinci, perdi.*” [Only winning counts. And if you don’t win, you lose.]<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the ‘war regiment’ of a *contrada*, under its

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.contradacapitanadellonda.it/Palio/1.htm>.

*capitano*, engages in illegal yet accepted<sup>16</sup> secret arrangements, i.e. bribes, the *partiti*, to either bribe the jockey of an enemy or help a friend. As *partiti* are in the end only paid by the winner, winning the Palio is expensive (numbers mentioned are up to € 250,000 per victory), while losing it is economically sensible (see Dundes and Falassi 2005:75–89, which, while dated, is the best description of the *partiti*). Still, it is the combination of purpose and lottery, of bribes and not knowing the horse and its position, i.e. the combination of chance and design, which makes the Palio so interesting, if one has a stake in it (Park 1992:87–88).

Thus, for instance, the oft-delayed start, which Liebscher points out (2001:93 N134), has to do with the tenth horse, the *rincorsa*, starting when it seems best for whatever arrangements have been made, and that is when for its jockey the situation seems advantageous – for an outsider, this seems like needless delay, but it does serve a purpose. Still, for any outside observer, and for more and more of them, this is an exciting race as well, and thus many non-Sienese have watched it. The Palio became very popular throughout Italy already in the 1930s, including what one would call mass tourism, such as special trains from the bigger cities to Siena (Park 1992:90 N16; for the earlier history of Palio change, see Parsons 59–80). Today, it is broadcast live by RAI3, the national television station.

However, as anyone who has been to Siena, or even just read about it, will assure you, “The Palio is larger than life. So much of life is contained in the Palio” (Dundes and Falassi 2005:200). For “a Sieneese it is not possible to escape the influence which the Palio exerts, nor is it possible to deny one’s feelings of affinity for one’s own *contrada*. Many informants spoke of being ‘caught’ or ‘trapped’ by the power of the Palio” (Park 1992:86). The experience is likened to that of a drug (Warner 2004:155), virus (260), incurable illness (Park 1992:86), madness (87), or fever (Silverman 1989:227). None of these, it may be noted, is actually positive – except orgasm, which only pertains to a victory (Park 1992:92 N39; Warner 2004: 155). The victory parties after that, which go on for a few days, are likewise a frenzied mass event almost all over Siena, in which the tension of the race is released.

What seems clear is that today the Palio is the central point of urban Sieneese identity, and all scholarship has shown that it has become more so during the last decades. It has undergone a “revitalization and retraditionalization” (Warner 2004: 151); while it had never disappeared, since the 1970s it has been particularly strong, and has gained importance at the end of the 20th century. “As the fame of the Palio grew and the composition of Sieneese society began to change, so the significance and the claims being made for the Palio and the *contrade* began to increase. ... The Palio, from being a relatively unimportant event, had become the single most important representation of Siena for both the Sieneese and for out-

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<sup>16</sup> “Contrary to the caricature of the Palio as a chaotic race where anything goes, it is regulated to an extreme degree and in an often finely legalistic manner. It is, moreover, a particularly subtle form of regulation, which recognizes distinctions between law and custom, between rules that may be broken and those that may not be, and between acceptable and unacceptable ways of breaking rules.” (Silverman 1989:229)

siders” (Warner 2004:80). Yet, while it has become a major tourist event, still the “Palio as such is authentic” (248).

How to interpret the Palio is a matter of much controversy amongst the surprisingly small circle of experts – as play, game, or ritual, and in which way. Perhaps the best-known interpretation is one as metaphor by Dundes and Falassi, using a peculiar psycho-analytical-*cum*-Lèvi-Straussian approach that is mostly interesting as a historical case study of social theory in the early 70s.<sup>17</sup> What interests us, however, is the connection of Palio and *contrade*.

#### 4.2. *The Palio and the contrade*

It is often said that the Palio *is* the *contrade*, or that which creates them – but is it? Liebscher claims that the term Palio is “used by the Sieneese *pars pro toto*”, i.e. presumably for the entire *contrade* system (2001:96), and this is often enough done in the literature as well. There seems, certainly, to exist a mutual dependency, and as was mentioned, one of the original purposes of the *contrade* seems to have been, if we disregard the military company antecedents, to put up a Palio and similar games.

Palio and *contrade* have only been connected since the end of the Sieneese republic at best, but as has been argued above, the modern *contrade* are even more recent. That “the development of the *contrada* structure and the Palio went hand in hand” (Silverman 1989:230) is probably correct – “as the major function of the *contrade*, it created a focus for their identity, a stimulus to their formal organization, and a cyclical rhythm that fostered their continuity. The *contrade* are not to be explained by the Palio, for they precede it ..., but the Palio became an instrument of the *contrade*’s continued vitality. Once the Palio was established, Palio and *contrade* reinforced each other” (Silverman 1979:426). In that sense, Silverman is right to say that the Palio “race is essentially a competition among the *contrade* carried out through a politics of alliance, negotiation, and quasi-military tactics” (1979:415).

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<sup>17</sup> The book has often been criticized, not only, but especially strongly, by Silverman (1979: *passim*); not for its approach, but for being unspecific and applying the approach particularly badly. (418, 431–432) An excellent critique that challenges both the Freudianism and the obsession with a specific male perspective is the essay by Logan (1978:58–61). The authors’ reply to this very valid criticism is that “the majority of scholars insist upon ignoring or misunderstanding the symbolic aspects of traditional human behavior” (Dundes and Falassi 2005:16). However, it is the cliché-ridden, outdated kind of Freudianism in the interpretive chapter (165–206), not the symbolic approach, which is the problem of the book.

Since this chapter is rather separate from the rest of the book, one can use only the latter, which contains some very valuable factual information. The main problem with that part is that it, too, is from 1972 (20), and since then, so much has changed both in the world and even in Siena and thus also with the *contrade* and the Palio – this was another world politically, structurally as far as living in Siena is concerned; there were no cell phones, no internet – that it is almost a historical account by now. (There is a small update on the *corteo*, 110, and some additional bibliographic references for 1976–2004 as well, 220–223.)

In that sense, what is first, *contrada* or Palio, is a moot question, as by now they are interconnected and have been for a while, to the point that neither appears to be able to exist without the other. The Palio certainly is what *contrada* life revolves around, in different respects: “It is not enough to say that the Palio represents a dramatic enactment of *contrada* life. Rather, the Palio provides an emotional outlet for all the love and hate relationships bound up in the *contrada* system” (Dundes and Falassi 2005:49) – or, created by it, or, channeled by it? It seems that the Palio does not create inter-*contrade* tensions, but that, to the contrary, “the emotions during the Palio mirror the relations between the *contrade*, as they exist during every day for the entire year” (Warner 2004:153). The enmity is there, during everyday life (183–185) – but of course, it may be substantially fueled, in turn, by the Palio.

With these effects, the Palio leads to a “physical re-creation” of the *contrada* (and not only the winning one!), including making the outside *contradaiolo* to come ‘home’, if only for a while (see Liebscher 2001:89; Parsons 2004:124). That this happens in a cyclical way has been much observed – that way, one is always reminded of the *contrade*’s existence and importance (see Liebscher 2001:64, 97). And the season, including the “hibernation” – the hiatus between September and May, which matters greatly and does indeed exist –, is spaced out nicely so that the Palio becomes neither boring nor forgotten. Thus, the deterritorialization of the last decades is partially counterbalanced by the participatory act of the Palio, which became exactly the more important the more deterritorialization occurred. “In the ritual, the individual can participate in community that can be clearly seen and felt” (Warner 2004:156).

## 5. Contextualizations

### 5.1. The *cazzotti*

One of Warner’s most interesting chapters is the one on the *cazzotti*, ritualized group fistfights between *contrade* members on the Piazza del Campo and elsewhere, which are not covered anywhere else (Warner 2004:189–215). The fisticuffs on the piazza are traditional; they involve up to 200 men between 18 and 40 (Warner 204:211) and last up to half an hour. Just like the beating-up of corrupt jockeys, they are somewhat ‘normal’, but they are also structured – no personal motives are allowed here, like in sports, and there is the possibility of a handshake later. It is claimed that police and court interference by outsiders (policemen are often from the *mezzogiorno*) has turned them into a problem, raising the level of violence through interference (Warner 2004:194, 204–205), but this is hard to believe – what is more probable is that outside police did interfere and thus create a track record of violence that already existed.

In this context, it is well to remember that the history of the medieval and later Italian *comune* is one of a very high level of violence (something that is conveniently forgotten when admiring art and political theory) – the only non-violent

history is that of Venice, and here, its suppression was quite radical and arguably violent in itself. Siena had a particularly high level of violence, also in later times, symbolized by the infamous holocaust of 13 Jews who were burned alive in the Piazza by a fundamentalist Catholic mob in 1799 (the “Viva Maria” insurgence which prevented the Palio that year; see Seume 1985:312, Cagliariaritano 1983:275). However, particularly if thus compared, one may say that the level of everyday violence is in fact extremely low today, and I think I have never seen a less violent (even in mannerisms and general behavior) fan community than that of the AC Siena, most recently after a home match (admittedly won) on 11 March 2006.

While the Piazza del Campo *cazzotti* are more or less well-known – rather less –, Warner’s almost detective-like work shows that there are actually *cazzotti*-like fights throughout the entire year, sometimes not ritualized.<sup>18</sup> These are frowned upon by the *contradaioli* (Warner 2004:197), and there is social control against them, the *contrade* themselves serving as the controlling institution (201). Yet, it is admitted that since the 1980s, the number of such fights has increased, and now there are even more of them, sometimes even personal ones. It is often thought that reasons for this are the existence of so many outside members of the *contrade* and that one does not know them (Warner 2004:205–206), and the alienation of youth from the *contrade* in general (210), but all this has not been verified. It would make sense, though, that especially outside *contradaioli* might feel that they have to establish their identity by fighting hard for their *contrada* (something all *contradaioli* I talked to vehemently denied). These fights have also apparently become more violent (Warner 2004:207), although Warner speculates that, once again, maybe this was so earlier as well, just not talked about (209 FN 171; see Dundes and Falassi 2005:56 N31 with some historical references). What only Warner has mentioned in print, and what my own interviews have corroborated, is that women participate as well – not only vicariously, by pushing the men to fight, but also in physical group fights between women groups, as my conversation partners stressed. I was even told of regular physical fights between teenage girl groups on Saturday nights, as not a common but neither a rare phenomenon. One can see this as female empowerment, or as a deterioration of the level of civility.

In addition, there is the general tension of the Palio. There is a nice anecdote in Warner about tourists who are in danger of being beaten up for having bought, during the Palio, *fazzoletti* of one *contrada* and about to go, wearing them, through the territory of another one – and it happens that these are the colors of a victorious *contrada* and the territory is one of the *nemica*, the enemy *contrada* (see below; Warner 2004:244–245). Of course, what that means is that the symbol is ‘real’: It might almost be arguable that a symbol is only politically real if you can get beaten up for it.

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<sup>18</sup> Dundes and Falassi describe similar fights (before the 1970s, it seems), but they say that just “a few blows are exchanged” and that they happen not in the Piazza, but in specific areas (70). It is unclear what they are talking about – whether this is just a misunderstanding (or downplay) or another third form of such fights.



What all of this underlines is not only that and how the *contrade* are identity creators, but also that the peace and quiet of Siena that the *contrade* allegedly creates may come at a certain price, and that there is some semi-structured youth group violence that is even on the increase. There has been too little research on that, but as the safety of Siena was one of our main reasons to investigate what made it so special, this is an important point: Even if this is a generation-based problem, it seems that violence may exist here as well, only in a different form. On the other hand, even including this, general violence probably still stays at an extremely low level.

### 5.2. The bank

One of the most interesting features of Siena is that it is the seat of the oldest bank in the world, Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena (MPS), founded in 1472 by the *comune* and so a public bank all along, indeed historically a savings bank. It is, as Liebscher calls it, “the most important institution in the city” (2001:33, see 42–43). Liebscher’s exercise to ask for the ten most important persons in Siena among city council members showed the President of the bank, Giovanni Grottanelli de’ Santi, as the number one, leading before the Mayor, the Rector of the University, the Archbishop, etc. (31–32, 39).<sup>19</sup> All my interviewees confirmed the overwhelming and indeed dominating importance of the bank in Siena’s city life.

The importance of MPS for our topic has already been noted by Silverman, who goes so far as to say that the MPS provides “at least part of the answer” to the question, “what is it about Siena that accounts for the uninterrupted and continuance there of the Palio-*contrada* complex? ... 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 *comune* and the *contrade*” (1985:100; see 236; 1979:421). For instance, it takes care of the enormous costs of the medieval costumes used in the Palio. The role of the bank, according to Silverman, has increased (1989:231–232).

As information about MPS is often outdated and usually somewhat vague, some more precise and timely statements might be in order here to appreciate the importance of the bank. Founded indeed as an initiative against usury (Catoni 2004:7–8) and established as a bank in our sense in 1624, it underwent its most significant change in 1995, when it split into a foundation, the Fondazione Monte dei Paschi di Siena and the more commercial bank (MPS), whose shares have been

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<sup>19</sup> Liebscher is right to say, and the only one to see, that these institutions could be put on a map (43), but the one she provides (44) is by far too rough and does not help to understand the city. A *desideratum* would be a real interpretive map, connecting space, meaning, and influence in Siena, which after all is so spatially determined; see Hölscher (1998) for an excellent treatise on this subject.

It is of additional interest that Grottanelli de’ Santi, who served as MPS President between 1993 and 2000, is an academic and former Dean of the University of Siena Law School, not a professional banker; see <http://www.unisi.it/dipec/en/grottanelli.html>.

traded publicly since 1999.<sup>20</sup> The Fondazione holds 49% of the bank (other shareholders are very minor), and the bank in turn is the holding company of the MPS Banking Group (MPG), which owns several Italian and foreign banks and financial services institutions such as insurance and real estate companies. MPG has total assets over € 150 million, deposits over 190 million, almost 2,000 outlets, 26,500 employees, and 4.5 million customers. It is the 5th largest Italian bank and one of the 100 largest banks (around no. 80), depending on the measure, globally. (All information based on “The MPS Group” 2006.)

To have, in a small city like Siena, a global banking house that, through its foundation, spends half of its profits on the cultural infrastructure of its home town (a *comune* which has historically owned the bank), and that uses the history and culture of this city as part of its corporate identity, is surely a special, if not a singular characteristic of Siena that cannot be stressed too strongly – and one that, if missing from an account of Siena, shows that the treatment was not realistic.

### 5.3. Globalization

Finally, can such an introspective, local system as that of the *contrade* survive during globalization? Warner’s book is the only one which attempts to describe and analyze the ‘global’ net in which Siena operates, and the feedback thereof – of how a society like the Sienese can exist in the globalized context (2004:216–275).

There certainly is the strong media interest, the broadcasting of the Palio, the mass tourism, etc., and, not knowing the local traditions, outsiders often have another perspective, which claims dominance in the ‘globalized’ (or at least Italian, or ‘Western’) discourse (Cito 2000:97–138). This includes the problem of cruelty to animals, which the Palio’s defenders counter with typical hunters’ (or bullfight aficionados’ or military derby fans’) claims in the same debate: Animals are treated even worse elsewhere; the horses are actually rather appreciated, etc. (Warner 2004:251–256) But the Palio is a public event, and thus radically different from the slaughter-house; with its performative claims, it establishes norms. And there can be no doubt that because of the behavior of the jockeys, semi-legalized drugging of the horses, and most of all, the race track which makes for cruel falls, horses are indeed often mutilated and die. In a civilized society – which Siena very much claims to be – this is unacceptable today, and thus the Palio is rightly criticized. Whatever one thinks of the Palio, this is a very ugly aspect. It may be justified to support the Palio on balance nonetheless, but it does not help to deny that it is ambivalent, that there are problematic aspects as well, and the treatment of the horses is surely the worst one of them.

What is interesting, in this context, is how resilient the *contrade* are against such criticism. Wagner’s sensible position here is that globalization and the (inter)national media do not replace or destroy the local identity, but they do influence it, and there is both homogenization and heterogenization of culture at

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<sup>20</sup> Website of the foundation: <http://www.fondazionemps.it/>; of the bank: <http://www.mps.it>.

the same time (Warner 2004:59). Warner cites here the already mentioned self-validation of the *contrade* among each other (which would not be the case, were there only one unified city), a high level of self-reflexivity (272), and the fact that the media and their imagery is important, but that Siena tries and manages to control them and what they broadcast – that there is give and take (273–274).<sup>21</sup> The same is also true regarding the treatment of horses which during the last few years has been adapted and improved as well.

So, the “Palio as such is authentic” (Warner 2004:248), not touristy at all; as Park phrases it, “within this very public display, attended by thousands of outsiders and watched by millions of television viewers, there is a domain which is exclusively Sienese” (89). If anything, there are problems of tourists who believe it is staged, perhaps for them; a lesson they, as Warner thinks, have learned on other travels (248–249). During the Palio, everyone who is not a *contradaiolo* is a tourist (248) – this is in some sense the typical tourism problem that one can find everywhere, but in another, it gives tourists a privileged position. Complaints from ‘mere’ tourists that they have not been allowed to participate is however apparently rather rare; what is true is that it is a thing of the *contrade* and thus, having no membership or interest makes for low interest. The Palio is for the Sienese, and more precisely, for the *contrade* members.<sup>22</sup>

What one certainly can assert is that the Palio does not seem to be endangered by ‘globalized’ attention and therefore criticism, but that its protagonists can balance the bad feedback with the good (including the higher income through tourism), that the Palio enforces local identity during globalization (Parsons 2004: 156), and that the Sienese, as in general the *contrade* system, continue in their *Senesità* (specific ‘Sieneseness’), changing the Palio-*contrade* complex as they go along so that all stays the same: “*Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi*” [If we want everything to stay as it is, everything has to change] (Tomasi di Lampedusa 1993:41).

## 6. Reassessment

### 6.1. The Palio as sport and carnival

“*Il Palio non è sport*” [The Palio isn’t sport].<sup>23</sup> This is the typical view, but is it actually true? The protest against the sports quality of the Palio is too frequent that one can avoid looking where the differences really are.

<sup>21</sup> On the Palio, outside perspectives, and globalization, see the excellent segment in Savelli and Vigni 2003:493–539; Cito 2000 is an excellent analysis of the respective discourse, which also shows the adaptation of outside discourses.

<sup>22</sup> In consequence, all my conversation partners from Siena who were not *contradaioli*, and actually from outside the city, mentioned distaste for both the Palio (during which they get particularly alienated from Siena), and for the cruelty to animals – the latter perhaps because it is one of the best arguments against the Palio that a conversation partner from the outside is almost bound to agree with.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.contradacapitanadellonda.it/Palio/1.html>; see Silverman 1989:232.

It is often said that it seems necessary for the *contrade* to have an ‘enemy’ (*la nemica*), because if not, one misses part of the fun, and that is indeed so – partially similar to a game where one has no antagonist. After all, one ‘wins’ the Palio if the ‘enemy’ loses and thus, one is much more emotionally involved. Just as in a game, however, or even more so, enmity is mostly constructed, it is artificial, except some rivalries that are built *on* it. So, “differences are created interactively in order to be able to experience the tension of the play/game.” (Warner 2004:186) Not much theorizing is necessary here – as a recent book on the UNC-Duke basketball rivalry is titled, “*To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever*” (Blythe 2006), and the entire book points to the pleasure this competition gives to the fans – although there is more social difference between the allegedly out-of-state, elitist Blue Devils and the good-ol’-boyish Tarheels (Yardley 2006) than between Torre and Onda.

This is just as in most ball games, which are half the fun if one does not side with one team – which is precisely why many tourists and outside observers choose a *contrada* and rally for it. This is also where betting on the Palio comes in – it is not a Sienese thing at all, but of course it happens frequently by outsiders, even institutionalized, who participate in the Palio.<sup>24</sup> All this is not to say that the Palio is sports, but to talk about ‘mere’ sports and thus claim that that is not what the Palio is, is not valid either. Rather, the sports element is too close, too obvious and too helpful to ignore it.

But the main argument against the Palio as sports is precisely that it is too serious, too multi-dimensional and identity-creating to be compared to sports. Altogether, this is a surprising argument coming from Italy with its soccer *tifosi*. After all, ‘to live for the club’ is something one hears from soccer fans, too, and soccer – more than basketball, perhaps (although MPS of course supports both in Siena) – as an *ersatz* religion is really not something that should come as a surprise to many. Of course, radical soccer fandom is usually the sign of projection, of someone who is not happy with his own life, but in general, the commitment, the tribalism, and especially the symbols and rituals very clearly show a strong parallel.

The other phenomenon the Palio can be likened to is Carnival, something mentioned by Warner (2004:148). It is likewise said that Carnival is so much less than the Palio, but this is something that no one even remotely familiar with, for instance, Cologne would dismiss as trivial. Here, too, the rituals, the pageant, the colors, the membership in separate communities that create belonging to the whole are very obvious. The act of the race is missing in Carnival, but the cathartic effect is particularly pronounced. The elitist, conservative, bourgeois, closed and shy character of the Sienese that is often mentioned, also by themselves (Liebscher 2001:48–49), is of course not in conflict with this, but makes a lot of sense – it might be only possible with such a release system. “The festive event Palio is the

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<sup>24</sup> I can attest that I myself lost such a bet in the August 2004 Palio. On no betting ever, see Dundes and Falassi 2005:11; Cagliariitano1983:160; Park 1992:89 N4.

peak and the time during which aggressions and competition are admitted to a higher degree than is permitted during the [rest of the] year” (Warner 2004:154). It is “an emotional outlet for the individual’s frustrations”, tolerated in an otherwise very uptight city (Park 1992:87). This might very well be a description of Carnival, which after all serves to a good extent, if not primarily, as a valve function (as an example, see Dirks 1987; on the valve function, Liebscher 2001:55).

In short, if one wants to understand the Palio without being seduced by its allure, it is well to clearly see the parallels to sports and Carnival.

### 6.2. *The artificiality of the contrade*

This perspective also helps us to recognize perhaps the most important overlooked aspect of our subject: What is true for the Palio is *a fortiori* true for the *contrade*. If one says that soccer and Carnival are really ‘about’ nothing, then the same is actually true regarding the *contrade*. *In a very profound sense of the word, the contrade are completely artificial.*

The reason why this is so rarely, if ever, seen is, in my opinion, that almost all social scientists studying the *contrade* have been anthropologists, and that means people who make nary a difference between reality and narrative, impression and fact, cognition and the outside world – in fact, one of the main tenets of almost all anthropology today is that there is no reality outside of perception. And while there is much that is going for this view (although perception is only part of reality, not all of it), from a socio-political perspective, it is important to dispense with culturology for a moment, to dare to take a perspective that is not ‘hip’ and thus to arrive at the heuristically most important question of what the *contrade* and their conflict are actually about. In this, we may follow Dieter Prokop’s recent admonition (2005) to look in a rational way at the genuine socio-political conditions of things and not just at images and feelings which, after all, may easily be there for a purpose as well.

What makes the Palio special is that it is literally about nothing, and that the *contrade* are so fiercely different because they, too, stand for nothing but themselves. Their separateness is, at least today, entirely created. And on the intensity of the feelings involved, one can cite the much-debated quote, usually attributed to Henry Kissinger, that “university politics are so vicious precisely because the stakes are so low.” The Palio, and *contrade* enmity, is so fierce precisely because there are no stakes whatsoever, except created ones – which are, of course, real for the people involved, and thus also objectively, but not independently real in the end.

The competition, from the Palio to those of the most beautiful fountain, the best feasts etc. (Warner 2004:163) – which of course makes the city better, and better for all – is all ‘very symbolical’ and thus best symbolically understood. Silverman argues forcefully that it “is also politics... But what kind of political phenomenon is the Palio-*contrada* complex? The concept of politics, in its broadest sense, has to do with who gets what” (1989:234). But that is the point: the *contrade* do not

compete about anything; they are precisely not about who gets what, except the Palio, which after all is a more or less worthless banner. There is no fight among the *contrade* for space, influence, money, or anything else – this is why it is so important to see that they are NGO's. Again: This is not to deny that on a secondary level, the *contrade* are very real, and that perception matters – but it is important that the basis of enmities and friendship, even of difference, is not based on any politico-economic reasons whatsoever.

If we, likewise heuristically, follow Carl Schmitt's controversial, yet in its sharpness very helpful, definition of politics as being in the end about friend and foe, this makes the matter clearer still. The *contrade* in the very end never question each other's existence – that is the game character – (Warner 2004:162), and therefore, according to Schmitt (1991:33), they are in the end not genuinely political – and not real enemies in the true sense of the word. Dundes and Falassi, when they say that the “degree of love for one's *contrada* can only be exceeded by the degree of hate for the rival *contrada*” (2005:49; see also Parsons 2004:151–153), point to the other direction, but this is a nonsensical statement (as regarding the North Carolina basketball enmity mentioned above), as it leads to an inflation of the concept of hate. Again, they do not fight for any serious matter; not for economic means nor for political power – and thus, the *contrade* are precisely not the successors to medieval feuds between clans (but see Dundes and Falassi 2005: 50).<sup>25</sup> One might even go so far as to claim that because there is no natural competition between the *contrade* for the system to be sustainable, one had to be created, and this is the Palio.

### 6.3. The inclusivity of the *contrade*

Looking, indeed, at how both St. Catherine of Siena and St. Bernardino were so opposed to factionalism in Siena (Dundes and Falassi 1975:50), which was why the famous IHS symbol was suggested by the latter so as to unite the city (on San Bernardino's efforts in preaching civic peace and unity in Siena, see Polecritti 1988), Siena is today famous for what appears to be disunity. Yet, it is generally argued that the division into *contrade* actually helps the whole – this was also part of our initial question (See e.g. Parsons 2004:154–155).

As Warner claims, “The *contrade* form, as a whole, a segmentary system whose parts can only be understood in interplay. Processes of identity formation occur via common identification as social community and, at the same time, via the delineation and differentiation of each *contrada*” (2004:158). As we saw in the segment on globalization, the segmentation also leads to means of mutual validation (239) and thus to much more resilience of the *comune* as such.

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<sup>25</sup> It is very interesting, though I think more amusing, that (some?) souvenir shops on *contrada* soil will sell the flags of all *contrade*, but not that of the *nemica* (Dundes and Falassi 1975:138–139), or, in a very contemporary way, that websites of the *contrade* will provide the name of the enemy but often not provide a hyperlink to the latter's website.

This situation can be compared, for instance, to the Cambridge or Oxford colleges: One is a ‘real’ member of the University only if a member of a college, and this is what is asked first from someone else and where one’s identity lies. No true Oxbridge student or alumnus would wear a University sweatshirt, let alone tie. In that sense, it is to be a ‘true’ Sieneſe to be a true *contradaiolo* (Liebscher 2001:69, 74, 210; Dundes and Falassi 2005:29; Parsons 2004:106; Park 1992:83–84; Logan 1978:62)

What this means, in turn, is that someone who would focus on the city as such would be clearly a ‘foreigner’ – which means that the majority of both the people actually living in Siena and even of the Sieneſe citizens are actually ‘foreigners’.

That, as Park points out, was completely different around 1900: Then, anyone who would have been born *nelle lastre* – “on the cobble-stones”, i.e. in the (old) city, *intra muros* – was a Sieneſe (1992:80–81). Perhaps the shift between then and now was an attempt – and a fairly successful one, as we can see – to “stave off the modern world’s erosion of what they believed to be a distinctive way of life” by ‘the Sieneſe’” (Park 1992:82). Park’s interpretation is that defining Senesità via *contrade* membership, which combines local belonging, ancestry, and place, “over-emphasises the historical and social importance of the *contrade*. Their position has until the last sixty years been a marginal one” (Park 1992:82). Thus, the “identification with the *contrada* has perhaps increased in the last decades as a result of the displacement of much of the Sieneſe population and the sense of loss which this has engendered” (82).

If the city walls are seen as a symbol and symptom (Liebscher 2001:49), it must of course be said that they do not delineate Siena anymore, but only old Siena. What this might mean is, again, that a majority of people living in, and even born in, Siena could be excluded from being ‘truly’ Sieneſe, from Senesità. For those preserving the old ways of Siena, this might be a price worth paying; from considering Siena as a model *polis*, the question poses itself whether this is a viable model at all. What is very clear on all levels is that the Palio-*contrade* complex serves as an exclusionary mechanism.

All writings on the subject leave it unclear whether anyone, i.e. also a non-Italian-speaker or a non-ethnic European, even if born *nelle lastre*, would automatically become a *contradaiolo*. It is true that the similarity of physical features that is often alleged for *contrade* (Warner 2004:176–178; Dundes and Falassi 2005:39; Park 1992:77) is not real, but it does point to a special understanding of *contrada* membership. And even as regards Italians, even genuine Sieneſe of old stock, *contrada* membership is still not a given – adaptation to the ways of the *contrade* is, it is said, likewise required. There is also the oft-claimed association of the *contrade* with the Roman Catholic Church (see Liebscher 2001: 77; Silverman 1989:225; especially Parsons 2004, whose search for the Sieneſe “civil religion” makes him emphasize this), which makes it doubtful whether a non-Catholic could indeed be a *contradaiolo* (but see Park 1992:77). The *contrade* are conservative, and they do – also inside – promote conformity and a traditional

lifestyle, something that is not seen in the literature at all. “Only he is tolerated who adapts” (Liebscher 2001:47; see Park 1992:86).

On the other hand, this does only apply to a certain extent, and it seems to me that the *contrade* are, by and large, accessible. There are black, Protestant, openly gay, and Jewish *contradaioli*, for instance, and while it is said that at the beginning, they may have acceptance problems, work for the *contrade* or simple presence, precisely because of the still tightly knit community, will change this very quickly – and among the younger generation of old-stock *contradaioli*, of whom hardly anyone can afford to live *nelle lastre* anymore, this is not a problem in any case. What counts is work for the *contrada*, as it well should – adaptation was said to consist in “entering with humility and working one’s way up”, and that is not a bad way for any such organization. The same is true with membership by other Italians: Claims that it is very difficult to get into a *contrada* other than by blood or birth on territory, just as with nation states (Warner 2004:18; Liebscher 2001:68 N86), could not really be corroborated *in situ*. It was rather pointed out to me that membership was by birth, blood *or choice*, and that at every baptism, several adult candidates asked for, and received, *contrada* membership. In other words, from all I have observed, the *contrade* might be exclusive, but they do not exclude.

### 7. Lesson-drawing from the *contrade*?

In the end, whether one feels that lesson-drawing from the *contrade* would be a worthwhile enterprise or not depends entirely on one’s political philosophy. The feeling and the fact of safety are great in Siena, and so is, as Warner has said, the occasional feeling that “everything threatening – criminals, homeless, foreigners, junkies – is outside” (Warner 2004:167). It depends, now, whether one sees this as a good, or even legitimate, perspective; that such a perspective is shared by many is clear. Warner is right: For a non-tourist, it is difficult to appreciate the *contrade* from outside, as they are neither exotic nor a suppressed minority (221). The reason for this is that they are a structured form of the felt majority, of a minority that is not suppressed but, if anything, dominating.

However, although the *contrade* system on a first level of analysis seems to be based on exclusion and conformity – and to have a violent aspect –, all these points are actually rather minor because of the comparative openness of membership, the acceptance of the defiance of conformity, and ultimately – and comparatively speaking –, the very minor level of violence. Seeing the serious problems of today, and especially in light of the fact that a return to *polis* ethics – with no other reason given than ‘that is how we do it here’ – is all that appears to remain after the collapse of other ethics systems (including those based on the human person), the Siena model, in spite of the problems it has and that should be seen, might actually, both because and in spite of its problems, be no arcadia but a realistic utopia. After all, it does adapt to the times without loss of substance, and



enlarged openness seems to be the direction the *contrade* are taking – slowly, but in the end steadily.

So, the *contrade* are admirable on many counts, and precisely their artificiality means that they can actually serve as a model to solve certain problems. However, to replicate the Palio-*contrade* complex seems very difficult indeed, and to borrow just certain elements would probably be futile – the Sienese system is highly interdependent and referential, and one cannot have the effects in this case without taking over the system lock, stock and barrel. In addition, there might be some highly specific yet necessary features of Siena, such as the Monte dei Paschi, that are not really reproducible at all.

Thus, drawing lessons from Siena for urban life in the 21st century might be desirable, but it would be important to begin with a serious and careful reassessment of the *contrade* system from a social-scientific perspective to understand the system and its consequences. On this basis, one would then have to first, determine whether one would want to draw any lessons (but the answer might easily be affirmative). Then, one would have to see what can be reproduced anywhere else, or whether the Palio-*contrade* complex is even theoretically too specific for that.

What can be said in any case is that Siena as it exists today, with its Palio-*contrade* complex, is for other communities certainly a *heuristic* model along the lines of Plato's heuristic utopia, the *Politeia* – which one might not wish to follow, but which makes connections and consequences very clear. It may also be a genuine utopia that one might wish to follow (see Drechsler 2003b). Siena is by no means a historical tourist attraction, but one of the most fascinating Western urban communities of today, and further study from a policy perspective promises further interesting and, indeed, exciting insights.

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