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A cura di Giovanni Battista CORVINO

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15/ RECENSIONE: Mattias SMÅNGS, *Doing Violence, Making Race: Lynching and White Racial Group Formation in the U.S. South, 1882-1930*, New York, Routledge, 2017, VII + 169 pp.

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Anyone who is concerned with the history of African Americans in the United States, undeniably is aware of the ignominy of the “Lynching Era”, perpetrated by the white supremacists after the abolition of slavery in the South. Mattias Smångs – specialized in race and racial violence in the United States¹ – uses strong analytical and statistical evidence to demonstrate the emerging process of oppression. His book, *Doing Violence, Making Race: Lynching and White Racial Group Formation in the U.S. South, 1882-1930*, is a great addition to the international literature on the somber history of the Southern States of America.

Even though the lynching practices have been explored by numerous scholars, *Doing Violence, Making Race* provides additional insights on the interdependence between the reoccurring lynching era and the establishment of the Jim Crow’s system.

In the introduction, the author opens with a historical background to deeply explore his analysis and conclusions. Smångs mentions the relevance of the decisive socio-economic and political events of the Antebellum, as well as the Reconstruction and the post-Reconstruction period. The combination of these events forged a new system of economic dispossession, rooted in systematical political disempowerment aimed at social degradation of African Americans. As later validated in this book, the ambiguity around the “Race Problem” «that is, the issue of the nature of race and the proper arrangement of white-black relations»² is at the core of the matter.

¹ See SMÅNGS, Mattias, «Race, Gender, and the Rape-Lynching Nexus in the U.S. South, 1881-1930», in *Social Problems*, 2019, URL: < <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spz035> > [19 April 2020]; SMÅNGS, Mattias, «The Lynching of African Americans in the U.S. South: A Review of Sociological and Historical Perspectives», in *Sociology Compass*, XI, 8/2017, URL: < <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12500> > [20 April 2020]; SMÅNGS, Mattias, «Interracial Status Competition and Southern Lynching, 1882-1930», in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, XXXIX, 10/2016, pp. 1849-1868.

² SMÅNGS, Mattias, *Doing Violence, Making Race: Lynching and White Racial Group Formation in the U.S. South, 1882-1930*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 1.

Subsequently, the author presents the contributions, but also the limitations of contemporary lynching scholarship, by mentioning the literature's divide between the social scientific tradition studies and the cultural humanistic ones. Focusing on the main characteristics of both traditions, he observes in the first place their comparison «in seeking to account for aggregate lynching rates and trends across spatial and temporal scales»³. Second, the application of «theoretical approaches focusing on intergroup political and economic competition in explaining spatial and temporal lynching patterns»⁴ and last, the use of «statistical methods and lynching inventories containing hundreds or even thousands of events»⁵.

As an outstanding example of the former, Smångs mentions and comments *A Festival of Violence*, written by sociologists Tolnay Stewart and Beck Elwood⁶. As scholars demonstrated, it was the economic competition between blacks and whites in the labor market that caused the lynching in the South, as direct consequence of the abolition of slavery and the breakdown of the plantation system.

First, when African Americans started buying pieces of land to grow their cotton, they began to compete with white farmers for a share of the cotton market. Not only did the white Southern landowners need cheap labor in order to be economically more competitive, but they also found lynching to be an appropriate solution to keep African American workers obedient and functional to the exploitation of their labor.

Secondly, as wealthy landowners, landless lower-class whites also took an active part in the violent lynchings, as result of the competition with African Americans for job opportunities.

These two factors led to a greater rivalry for resources in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. As a consequence, the whites felt threatened by a growing cheap labor force of blacks and by their rising recognition in the political domain.

Even though whites from the upper and lower class were moved by diverse motives and ideologies, the economic circumstances in the South brought them together against the African Americans. According to Tolnay and Beck, this interclass coalition was a measure for an effective social and racial control that should have benefitted the economic interests of the Southern white population⁷.

Despite the great appreciation of *A Festival of Violence*, Smångs notes that the study is limited to the economic aspect of the events, thus it offers evidence and theories strictly from an economic standpoint: a theoretical-conceptual framework that is unable to address all facets of the lynching

³ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁶ TOLNAY, Stewart E., BECK Elwood M., *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1995.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

period thoroughly. The author further elaborates on the limitation issue with various examples of modern lynching literature that do not contain any analysis of the Southern economic competition, explaining the need of a new interpretation of the occurrence that serves a larger scope, which is ultimately the essence of *Doing Violence, Making Race*.

In the next segment, the author mentions several points that form the core of his book.

The first element is the problem of conceptualizing culture in terms of symbolic groups. To this point the author defines the narratives to be the stories that reconstitute a common identity to the group members and create a unified purpose among them. Including a shared goal, the narratives symbolize the expectations and the dedication of the very group that people associate themselves to. In fact, Smångs claims that:

narrative-embedded symbolic boundaries promote group-making practices and processes to the extent that they, for one thing, evoke collective identities, that is, notions and feelings of shared commonality and purpose, as well as affine and solidary actions, interactions, and relations among those perceived as similar to one another. To the extent that they, for another thing, evoke social identities, that is, individuals' sense of belonging to as well as inclusion in particular groups. And to the extent that they, for a third thing, produce social boundaries that systematically influence patterns of actions, interactions, and relations, including the distribution of resources, among and between groups based on purported categorical differences⁸.

The second argument of the book is about the impact of intergroup violence in setting symbolic group boundaries and classifications. The author considers such acts of violence to be valid to both perpetrators and spectators, as intergroup oppressions contribute to group boundaries and common purpose. The lynchings were implemented on an interpersonal level, as well as on a large scale of groups. Even though the lynchings and oppressions had familiar causes, the analysis demonstrate inconsistent outcomes. In the case of interpersonal violence, the perpetrator manifested less publicity and brutality than in cases of collective intergroup violence. Moreover, Smångs notes that:

intergroup violence may be seen as a practice whereby the ideals and visions of such narratives are realized by constituting social and collective identities of community inclusion and solidarity and instantiating social boundaries of domination and exclusion⁹.

⁸ SMÅNGS, Mattias, *Doing Violence, Making Race*, cit., p. 8.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

Not only were merely the polarization and the stratification the foundations for the violence among various groups, but they also were the product of such occurrences, as the author observes in his analysis.

The third main point of the book regards the extremist narrative of whites, their group stratifications and racial boundaries, as well as the establishment, the execution and the rationalization of the Jim Crow's system. After the defeat in the Civil War, the people of Southern Confederacy were intended to be affected by the initiatives of the Reconstruction period, as slavery was abolished, and the state of African American population was supposed to be improved in the economic, social and political aspects. Despite the efforts, the Antebellum system of racial oppression recurred in the Southern states, and it was later transformed into the Jim Crow's laws, enacted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and enforced until 1965. The Jim Crow's system was based on a belief that African Americans were not worthy, they were beneath whites and act as a direct threat to the white community. During this period, amid struggle, tension and violence, new racial symbolic boundaries defined the classification of "white" and "black". The newly introduced boundaries were set by the white racial group that desired and promoted the radical ideology of white supremacy.

The last key argument of the book is stating that lynching practices were deeply embedded in social occurrences that were considered customary before the Civil War, and «in the early years after emancipation, former masters tried to reestablish as much as possible the antebellum labor arrangements and worked hired wage labor in gangs similar to how they had worked slaves»¹⁰. Given such a background, the lynchings were shaped into the Jim Crow's system, which was implemented and normalized during the most aggressive period of the intergroup relations in the United States.

In the next chapters, the author provides theoretical-conceptual foundations and focuses on key historical aspects with the help of thorough analysis of statistics. Chapter 2 is an explanatory narrative of the cultural aspects that had an important role in the intergroup violence. In Chapter 3, Smångs explains the political, economic and social conditions prior to the Civil War, during the Reconstruction period and those of the post-Reconstruction times, claiming that the remodeling process of group narratives, boundaries and classifications is vital to the understanding of the establishment of Jim Crow's system in the South. The author describes in Chapter 4 the distinction between public and private lynchings, basing his assumptions on the ideal-types of intergroup violence introduced in Chapter 2:

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

public lynchings were a form of collective intergroup violence carried out by and for whites as a community, featuring eye-catching communality, publicity, ceremony, and brutality. Private lynchings were, in contrast, a form of interpersonal intergroup violence perpetrated on the behalf of particular white individuals by smaller bands typically outside the public purview without salient ceremony and excessive brutality¹¹.

The author symbolizes the public and the private types of lynching practices with well-known examples of the Sam Hose's lynching and the Grant Welly's lynching, accordingly.

Smångs continues to describe the role of intergroup violence in shaping the Jim Crow's system in the following chapters, observing the relationship between race, sex and lynching. He also draws the attention to the emerging new social boundaries and the beliefs of extremist views of white population. From his empirical analysis (Chapter 5), he affirms that:

the symbolic racial boundaries of extremist white supremacy, particularly as they related to interracial sex, were transformed into social racial boundaries through the collective violence of public lynchings during the most formative years of Jim Crow around 1900¹².

We can therefore assert that the idea of African Americans being a threat to the white community radicalized in other aspects of the relationship between blacks and whites: the interracial sexuality.

Later in the book, the author describes the cooperation and solidarity of white extremist groups that provoked more aggressive public lynchings (Chapter 6). The unity of the supremacists and public lynchings were interdependent, as one fueled the other and pushed it to higher scales. Private lynchings instead were strongly conveyed by status, honor and race: social categories that constituted white identities (Chapter 7).

In the concluding chapter, credits are given to *A Festival of Violence* by E.M. Beck and Stewart Tolnay, which was the foundation for *Doing Violence, Making Race*. Smångs summarizes the contribution of *Doing Violence, Making Race* to the modern literature concerning the influence of lynchings in the establishment of the Jim Crow's system. After the explanation of the modern stereotype of young African American men, being a menace and its link to the lynching era, the book ends with a quote from *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* by William McFeely (1997). It reminds the horrible behavior that the humankind can demonstrate and the individual

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 89.

and collective struggle to heal after such events: «The past can never be erased and the ugliest human actions cast the longest shadows»¹³.

¹³ McFEELY, William S., *Afterword*, in FITZHUGH BRUNDAGE, William (edited by), *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997, pp. 318-321, quoted in SMÅNGS, Mattias, *Doing Violence, Making Race*, cit., p. 147.

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