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BOOK REVIEWS

The Illicit and Illegal in Regional and Urban Governance and Development, by Francesco Chiodelli, Tim Hall and Ray Hudson (eds.). London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 280.

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The complex connection between the (il)licit and (il)legal, as well as their relationship with territorial development, lie at the heart of this volume. As emphasized in the introduction of the book, the role of illicit and illegal actors and activities has been so far mostly underestimated in economic and political geography, as well as in regional studies and planning development literature. Chiodelli and his colleagues aim to fill this gap by editing a collection of studies whose innovative contribution is only partially expressed by the title of the book. On the one hand, in fact, as stated by the title, the chapters show how these actors and activities affect processes of territorial governance and development. On the other hand – and in a specular way – constant attention is devoted to the extent to which the spatial dimension shapes illicit and illegal phenomena, defining and reorienting them. Whereas the first perspective – simply stated, the effects of the illicit and illegal on territorial development – turns out to be particularly fruitful for regional studies, the second one – i.e. the influence of local features on illicit and illegal actors and activi-

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ties – appears to fall within the sociological, criminological and political literature on criminal networks and groups.

The editors clearly indicate that “spatial contingency means that context matters” (p. 5). In other words, a focus on the spatial dimension makes it possible to enhance the analytical role of context. Through this approach, the book marks a distance with the aforementioned specialized literature, where illicit and illegal phenomena are frequently interpreted as the simple outcome of the criminal actors instead of the complex interweaving of the agency dimension with institutional, political, cultural, cognitive and relational elements.

Furthermore, the adoption of a local scale favours attention to the particular traits that different contexts exhibit at regional and urban levels. This perspective warns us against unifying interpretations – not so rare when reasoning about networks and criminal organizations – which tend to represent large regions or even nations in a homogeneous way. To mention just the Italian case, the representation of the mafia in the public debate, where Southern Italy is often portrayed as a homogeneous criminal context.

Starting from these analytical assumptions, the authors develop an empirical project which testifies to their awareness of the conceptual and methodological challenges of working on the illegal and the illicit. Dealing with phenomena which are by their very nature opaque and mostly invisible, a multi-method approach is adopted for 14 case studies focusing on the precise role and the impact of the actors involved and the activities carried out, rather than proposing some vague general theories. The chapters explore a variety of geographical contexts – from the Sahara desert to the India-Bangladesh border, from Japan to Palermo and Rome, to name a

few – , focusing on a case-by-case basis on cities, on more or less vast regions and even on whole countries. The illicit and illegal activities investigated are also various, including for instance drug trafficking, territorial control, informal housing, and corruption. Despite some differences in terms of effectiveness and clarity in its different parts, the volume is overall endowed with coherence and offers to the reader conceptual and analytical suggestions running through the different chapters. For this reason, a final chapter summarizing some of the points that emerged and re-connecting some threads would have been appreciated, also in order to accentuate the comparative perspective of the volume.

Finally, the future work of Chiodelli and colleagues on this topic could benefit from greater attention to and analytical clarification of the dimension of power. It would be particularly fruitful to stress how power is distributed among the different actors, with regard to their economic, cultural, social, and reputational resources, as well as how they are – or are not – able to mobilize these resources in order to pursue their goals. As pointed out by the editors, in fact, the very definition of what is and is not licit depends on the adopted standpoint and on the interplay between different stakeholders characterized by asymmetries of power.

There is, therefore, room for a narrower examination of what is generically defined as the "dominant social perception" in the book, i.e. the set of commonly widespread impressions and opinions about what is licit and what is not in a specific situation. In other words, once due attention is paid to the context, it is possible to go back to questioning who benefits from advantages associated with the phenomena observed and what are the short- and long-term effects for individuals, networks, organizations and institutions. An approach of this kind seems particularly appropriate to develop the interesting reasoning presented in the introduction to

the volume about the possible positive outcomes of the illicit and the illegal behaviour. In this regard, the relationship between the immediate benefits derived from permissive political governance (including illegal and/or illicit actors) and some long-term negative repercussions, such as the loss of trust between citizens and institutions and the legitimization of who is driven by personal interests, should not be neglected. The empirical chapters in the volume offer important insights to deepen these kinds of questions and to reflect on the implications from both a moral and a policy-oriented point of view.

The diverse and rich contents of the book – which have been briefly recalled in this review – makes it suitable for a large audience, both in and outside the academic field. On the one hand, scholars and students from different disciplines, e.g. sociology, criminology, economics, political science, international relations, as well as geography of course, could find many empirical and analytical elements of interests in the volume. On the other hand, the book can also provide useful information and suggestions to public officers and policy makers for political projects and for the definition of new tools in fighting against criminal phenomena. Finally, the book could also rouse the attention of journalists and media commentators, considering the flurry international public debate about the drivers and the effects of the illicit and the illegal.

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