

# *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*

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The **Moral Basis of a Backward Society** is a book by Edward C. Banfield, a political scientist who visited Montegrano, Italy (Montegrano is the fictitious name used by Banfield to protect the original town of Chiaromonte, in the Southern Italian region of Basilicata) in 1955. He observed a self-interested, family centric society which sacrificed the public good for the sake of nepotism and the immediate family. Banfield as an American was witnessing what was to become infamous as the "mafia" or families (in Sicily and other parts of Southern Italy) that cared only for its own "members" at the expense of their fellow citizens. Banfield postulated that the backwardness of such a society could be explained 'largely but not entirely' by 'the inability of the villagers to act together for their common good or, indeed, for any end transcending the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family'.

Banfield concluded that Montegrano's plight was rooted in the distrust, envy and suspicion displayed by its inhabitants' relations with each other. Fellow citizens would refuse to help one another, except where one's own personal material gain was at stake. Many attempted to hinder their neighbors from attaining success, believing that others' good fortune would inevitably harm their own interests. Montegrano's citizens viewed their village life as little more than a battleground. Consequently, there prevailed social isolation and poverty—and an inability to work together to solve common social problems, or even to pool common resources and talents to build infrastructure or common economic concerns.

Montegrano's inhabitants were not unique nor inherently more impious than other people. But for quite a few reasons: historical and cultural, they did not have what he termed "social capital"—the habits, norms, attitudes and networks that motivate folk to work for the common good.

This stress on the nuclear family over the interest of the citizenry, he called the ethos of 'amoral familism'. This he argued was probably created by the combination of certain land-tenure conditions, a high mortality rate, and the absence of other community building institutions.

## External links

- Edward C. Banfield, *Moral Basis of a Backward Society [Paperback]* (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/49095975/Edward-C-Banfield-The-Moral-Basis-of-a-Backward-Society>)

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