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# Approaching and Explaining the Mafia Phenomenon. Attempts of a Sociologist

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# Approaching and Explaining the Mafia Phenomenon

## Attempts of a Sociologist

by Henner Hess

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### Introduction: How I Happened to Get Interested in the mafia

I went to Sicily for the first time in 1962, when I was still studying sociology at the University of Heidelberg. The fall of that year I spent in Partinico, a small town south of Palermo, as part of my research on non-violent social action. It may seem a little bit strange to go to Sicily to study non-violence, but in Partinico one could meet and talk to and observe the actions of Danilo Dolci, at the time next to Martin Luther King probably the most famous living representative of non-violence. He had, in 1957, received the International Lenin Peace Prize, and everybody called him the Sicilian Gandhi. In Partinico he had founded the *Centro studi e iniziative per la piena occupazione*, where he gathered a group of collaborators from Italy and other European countries. His interviews and discussions with common people were assembled in his two most successful books: *Banditi a Partinico* and *Inchiesta a Palermo*, both published in 1956. In 1960 he had published *Spreco*, a collection of studies on the waste of human and natural resources. In this book, he identified three main reasons for the lack of any development in Western Sicily: the passiveness of the people, the corruption of politicians, and the violence with which every reformist movement was repressed. To mobilize the people he relied, apart from his writings, on Gandhi's favored method, widely publicized hunger strikes.

The first time I met Dolci, a tall and heavy, open and very likeable man, he was in the middle of such a hunger strike. All day he rested on a bed in the living room

of his small house, where everybody could enter and speak with him. But many did not dare to. Dolci had just started a campaign – of which the hunger strike was part – to dam the river Iato, build an irrigation system, and use the water to develop the agriculture of the region. The project was somehow stuck, and Dolci was eager to mobilize the people and have them put pressure on the responsible administrations. The project did not please everybody. Above all, it did not please the owners of water sources, who were able to sell their water at high prices, or the owners of plantations already irrigated, who feared the competition. As Dolci explained, there were mafiosi involved on both sides; some defended the mentioned vested interests, others supported the owners of trucks who would profit from moving earth and building materials. It seemed all rather complicated to me, but one thing was clear enough: the remarkable role violence played in economic and social relations. From Dolci's books you could, by the way, learn the same main lesson: violence was an everyday phenomenon, while human life and social relations outside of the family were of negligible importance.

There are in *Spreco* twelve pages of an interview which seem to me of great interest with regard to the ambivalent phenomenon of the mafia. Two peasants talk about Genco Russo, the mafia boss of Mussomeli, a small village in the center of Sicily. One of the peasants is a friend of Russo's, the other just an admirer. They talk about Russo's career from simple herdsman to powerful landowner, about the crimes which he was reproached for having committed but which had never been proved, about his relations to a number of politicians for whom he had campaigned. They allude to all the mediations Russo was involved in. They call Russo "the one who mediates quarrels and conflicts." Then Dolci speaks with Russo himself, and Russo paints his portrait as a benefactor, someone who cannot refuse anything to anybody. "I was born this way," he says, "I try to be helpful to anybody who asks me a favor, it's in my nature. After the first one, to whom I had been of service, a second came and it finally became a habit. That's the way my reputation was established." Here we have all the ideology that legitimizes the mafioso – and which he probably believes in (at least the traditional *uomo d'onore* believed in) himself.<sup>1</sup>

In 1962, Palermo was in the middle of a ferocious mafia war. (Clan wars are, by the way, inherent to the mafia and the best proof against the idea of a centralized organization.) Everyday the newspapers were full of reports on

<sup>1</sup> Later on, I came across another, similar portrait of "Don" Calogero Vizzini, boss of Villalba, in Montanelli 1958. A number of novels I read at the time depicted the same picture, among them Tomasi di Lampedusa 1958, Sciascia 1961a, and Loschiavo 1962. The *mafiosi* of that time seemed to be wholly different people compared to today's gangsters – or is it just that a certain romanticism surrounding them has evaporated?

this war. Michele Pantaleone's interesting book *Mafia e potere* had just been published. Here you could read about the long history of collaborations between criminals and politicians, exchanging support at the elections for protection against prosecution. After three months in Sicily I went back to Germany and, then, to the United States where I spent a year to continue my research on non-violence, notably in Georgia and Alabama with Martin Luther King.

But Sicily had fascinated me, and I wanted to know more about the terrible, but fascinating phenomenon of the mafia. I started to read the classical studies (Alongi, Cutrera, Franchetti and Sonnino, Colajanni, Mosca, etc.) as well as the contemporary authors (Novacco, Renda, Candido, Romano, Maxwell, Hobsbawm, etc.). I traveled back to Sicily and talked to everybody who might have some valuable information for me. I visited Leonardo Sciascia who was, at the time, still teaching at a school in Caltanissetta, right in the center of Sicily. Sciascia presented me with his collection of essays *Pirandello e la Sicilia*, which included a chapter called *La mafia*. In this chapter there is a definition of the phenomenon: "An association of wrongdoers who strive to illegally enrich themselves and who pose as parasitic intermediaries, mostly by means of violent acts, between ownership and labor, between production and consumption, between citizen and State."<sup>2</sup> A short and useful definition that certainly covered the main points, but for me as a sociologist it remained too general. I was looking for detailed answers to precise questions. My questions were, maybe, simple, even naive from the viewpoint of, for instance, a historian overlooking a vast landscape. But they were questions that had not been answered, because they had apparently not been posed yet, at least not in the framework of sociological theory and with the help of sociological concepts. How does one become a mafioso? What is the structure of their criminal organization? What are the functions of mafioso behavior? I tried to find the answers by analyzing as many concrete cases as I could get hold of. I went to the archives, spent a whole (and very cold, no heating system there!) winter in the *Archivio di Stato* in Palermo. Unfortunately, one was only allowed to consult the material dating back at least seventy years. I chose the decade from 1880 to 1890 – and almost drowned in the mass of *fascicoli* where police reports from the villages, anonymous letters, court records and the like were lumped together. It seemed that nobody had ever looked at them after they had been put away.

Apart from those most important sources, I tried, of course, to get acquainted with more recent cases which I found in the literature or which knowledgeable

<sup>2</sup> Translated from Sciascia 1961b, 168.

people could tell me about. I have done this again while writing the resumé I give below (though there probably are a lot more valuable recent contributions which, unfortunately, have not come to my knowledge – my fault). My essential answers were developed on the basis of the old material from the archives, and the model was then checked against new facts. One review in an Italian newspaper accused me (in 1973 after the publication of the Italian translation) of writing about *la mafia del nonno*. True enough – but the *nonno* seems still alive in many respects. Even today, although the changes of the last two decades seem remarkable.

I won't dwell here on the history of the mafia phenomenon. It has been treated often and much better than I could do it by other authors. It seems quite clear that the important role local strong-arm men played in Sicily was an outcome of the long tradition of weak and far-away governments which could not establish state power with all its functions in a neglected and sometimes hardly accessible colony. The *mafioso* was always an ambivalent figure. He was, of course, a dangerous criminal as far as the law of the state was concerned, but in the eyes of many Sicilians, that did not automatically discredit anybody. The state was considered by many as a foreign power that levied taxes and forced sons into military service, while it was incapable of running efficient administrations or protecting the people (and protecting the ruling classes against the people). Besides the fear of reprisal at the hands of the *mafiosi*, the subcultural norms of *omertà* guaranteed almost total non-cooperation with the administration of justice.<sup>3</sup> And without complaints, reports, depositions by witnesses and so on, the effectiveness of this administration was severely restricted. The *mafioso*, on the other hand, was at least effective; and not only (even if foremost) in the service of the ruling class. When you were in trouble, you could turn to him and ask for help; when you needed protection; when you needed negotiation with cattle-thieves; when you needed a middle-man; when you needed a connection to the capital of the province, to Palermo or even to Rome, the *mafioso* was often ready to help. Months or years later, he would ask for some "small favour," such as cutting down the olive trees of a land-owner who refused protection, or casting your vote for the candidate the *mafioso* had recommended. Gradually, you became his client, the patron-client relationship being the most important other than blood ties in all traditional societies. The *mafioso* was feared, to be sure, but he also commanded admiration as the quintessential *uomo di rispetto* or *uomo d'onore* in a society where respect and honour meant everything.

<sup>3</sup> The existence of a specific subculture had always been a main point in explaining why the mafia flourished in Sicily (and my book, as well, contains the description of a specific subcultural normative system), but the topic has been treated since in a much more sophisticated theoretical way; see for instance Santoro 2000.

I also won't dwell on the changes during the last decades. The events of the past thirty or so years indicate some success in weakening the power of the *mafiosi*. In this context, five points stand out: the involvement in the drug trade which generated wealth but undermined legitimacy; the rigorous criminal prosecution; the mafia's counterproductive reign of terror against state officials; the disintegration of the *partito* networks; and finally the increasing number of *pentiti* who break the *omertà* and give evidence. Nevertheless, one cannot be sure whether optimism is justified. Has the very special mafia phenomenon turned into ordinary organized crime – or will Lampedusa, after all, be right in the end with his conviction that Sicilians always tend to *cambiare tutto per non cambiare nulla*? Reflections on this I will leave to more competent analysts. I will, instead, give a short sketch of the topics which – according to the commentaries on my book – could be regarded as the special contribution the book added to the study of the mafia: the careers of *mafiosi*, the structure of mafiose groupings and the functions of mafiose behavior, i. e. the special approach to the phenomenon through the use of sociological concepts.

## Careers

To become a *mafioso* one passes through a number of stages, and the concept of career is as useful here as it is in the analysis of any other profession – with the difference, of course, that the stages and the *rites de passage* are informal and in no way regulated as the stages in the career of a lawyer or a physician are. An informal career is always open, the passing from one stage to the next is never a sure thing; of those who start the race, many never arrive at the finishing line. In fact, many in the beginning do not even have a clear goal in mind, but just the next step.

Well-known *mafiosi* are usually rich and influential men, members of the middle classes, and they are usually described as such without paying much attention to the facts of their origin and ascension. At a closer look it turns out that most of them had been born to poor people, to small tenants, day labourers, herdsman. Crime for them is, if they are clever and lucky, a means of social advancement. And usually not just any crime, but an act of violence, a hold-up, a murder, a *delitto d'onore*. The act of violence leads to the discovery of power, the discovery that it is possible to manipulate other people and gain not only outward advantages but a deep psychological satisfaction from the imposition of one's own will. A decisive step is the confrontation with law enforcement following the crime. Some escape to the mountains and become bandits. Some are convicted and end up in prison. Some are never tried or are acquitted. And typically not acquitted for proved innocence but for lack of evid-

ence. This becomes the second vital selection criterion. It proves, on the one hand, a man's ability to silence witnesses and, on the other hand, the existence of influential friends and protectors. The former might just be due to the rules of *omertà*, the latter only perceived as such by the public (while the culprit only creates his *partito* subsequently). But, nevertheless, the first acquittal after the first trial strengthens a young man's sense of power and consolidates his position towards the outside world. He begins to be respected and feared.

New possibilities are opened up. The most important of these is recognition as a possibly valuable *picciotto* by established *mafiosi*. An *uomo di rispetto* mentions him with commendation and respect and tries to draw him into his clientele by demanding services from him (or rather giving him the chance to discharge such services) and offering him his protection. This process which is entirely informal, without any rigid rules, and may take different forms in detail, has frequently been simplified into admission into a secret society. Combined with this process, or sometimes independently of it, a second process occurs: the assignment of a *mafioso's* functions. A landowner or *gabellotto* or the owner of some legal or illegal business employs the novice who has proved himself by the successful use of force. Others turn to him to ask his support as a mediator. A *mafioso* is made by complementary action of others. *Mafioso non è chi si sente mafioso, ma chi è considerato come tale. Il pubblico fa il mafioso* - as an interviewee in Trapani expressed it (a nice example for the explanatory power of criminological labelling theory!).

If a young *mafioso* is ambitious, he will, after a while, clash with the older boss and finally replace him. The next step is the monopolization of power in a certain territory, fighting off competitors. Then comes the attempt to legalize his social standing, transferring illegal income into legal holdings, and, finally, the creation of an aura of legitimization of his role of mediator and protector. In the traditional society, the established *mafioso* represented a certain ideal: a strong and somehow mysterious man, an independent man, someone who did not have to do manual work, someone profiting from the admiration offered to *civili* and *galantuomini*.

Of course, this is the career model of the traditional *mafioso*. Much of the material content of the careers has changed. Urban settings have to a large extent replaced the village settings, modern industries the agricultural economy, simple crime like the drug trade are more important than mediation and protection as income-generating endeavors. Above all, in public opinion *mafiosi* lost much if not all of their legitimacy. While Genco Russo or Calogero Vizzini proudly walked the streets of Mussomeli or Villalba, affably talking to the common people, Salvatore Riina, Nitto Santapaola, Bernardo Provenzano, and their like had to hide underground. The fundamentals of career analysis are still applicable, though.

## Structures: The Basis of Mafia Power

A mafioso is like a spider. He weaves networks of friendships, acquaintances and obligations (Antonino Calderone).

The basic elements of traditional mafia structures were the *cosca* and the *partito* – the mafia “family” and the network of connections to politically influential persons. These two elements correspond to the two resources on which the power of the mafia fed: on the one hand, the capability to use violence, manipulate public opinion, and so on; and, on the other, the ability to influence state authorities and neutralise the police and the courts in the process of justice. What was decisive was the optimal strategic position of the *mafioso* as provider of, and channel for, services, goods and information between members of the *cosca*, with its wide circle of clients and members of the *partito*.

In general – and in principle – little has changed in this regard, even in the last decades. It seems that the *cosche* have become larger, in some instances even considerably larger. While previously the number of close followers of a *mafioso* seldom numbered more than 10 or 15 people, today, even if the average number may be similar, mafia group-ings exist which are believed to number between 70 and 80 men. The *cosca* Bontade in Palermo is supposed to have had as many as 120 members during the 1970s and the *cosca* Santapaola in Catania at the start of the 1990s had more than 200.

The nucleus of the modern *cosche* consists, as it always has, of the biological family: the basic internal connection is blood ties. In this way, loyalty and mutual dependability are still best guaranteed. Through marriage or the establishment of ritual kinship links, such as a godparent relationship, the mafia still attempts to make use of this, the most strongly-binding force, weaving large circles of contacts with one another. A good example of this could be seen in Palermo in the 1970s, in the very powerful conglomerate of the Inzerillo-Di Maggio-Gambino-Spatola families, who were each related to the others by marriage.<sup>4</sup> Around this solid nucleus, networks of friendships and clients are built up. There is, furthermore, the attempt –through ceremonial induction rites into the *Cosa Nostra* (“our thing”), oaths of loyalty and formal recognition as “members” – to make use of the elements of fascination and fear common to secret societies in order to foster mutual loyalty (more on this subject to come). Also, mutual financial interests could be a binding element. But mutual membership as *uomo d'onore* in the same *cosca*, and the even weaker bond of the

<sup>4</sup> See Raith 1984, 271 ff.; Arlacchi 1989, 135-143, 197.



common membership in the *Cosa Nostra*, together with common business interests, all remain secondary and precarious and do not prevent changes of alliance.

The number of adult male relatives – the number of sons of a *mafioso*, the number of brothers with their respective sons – is also the deciding factor of the military strength of a *cosca*, or of the dominant strong man, or of the dominant family group (from which the *cosca* usually takes its name). In addition, all *capi-mafia* are always trying to further increase their means of force and may take bandits, field guards and other promising young people into their service. This is often only done temporarily and for particular tasks, but sometimes they also become long-term *bassa mafia* clients, who have the opportunity to be co-opted into the inner echelons of the *cosca*. The same mechanism is still functioning today, as we read in the statement of the *pentito* (that is, a repentant former *mafioso* working together with the justice system as a crown witness), Antonino Calderone from Catania:

In the hazy circles of every reasonably influential uomo d'onore there are twenty or thirty young people moving around, who are nobody, but want to be somebody. These young people are at his disposal, always there to do him little favours, offering their services, asking if he needs them... willing to do anything and like nothing more than an opportunity to prove themselves, and, if possible, be accepted into the *Cosa Nostra*.<sup>5</sup>

The supply of such criminal labour is plentiful everywhere where economic misery and socio-cultural disintegration are particularly great, and in this regard the poor, proletarian districts of the Southern Italian cities of Palermo, Catania, and Naples strongly resemble those of the Third World. In these districts there are not only higher levels of destructive, diffuse violence, but there is also a great potential of military power which can be mustered by criminal organisations. However, they must be capable of controlling this potential. And in this, the *mafiosi* are not necessarily any more successful than the police, since the relationship is ambivalent (just as it had previously been with the bandits in the provinces). The small criminals provide not only a supply of new blood, they are also the plague against which the mafia must defend the business people they “protect.” They are partly even serious competition for the dominance over territory. For example, for a time the *cosca* of the Calderones had to withdraw from the centre of Catania to avoid large street gangs.<sup>6</sup> The latest appearance, mainly in the provinces of Agrigento and Trapani, of the so-called *stidde* (stars, criminal gangs which are not recognised by the *mafiosi* as *cosche* or as *cosa nostra*) shows up such tensions. In addition, the wide availability of these henchmen

<sup>5</sup> Translated from Arlacchi 1992, 149.

<sup>6</sup> See Arlacchi 1992, 154ff., 215-232, 246

and their client-relationships with individual *mafiosi*, rather than to the *cosca* as such, furthers potential divisions within the *cosca* as well as military clashes between *cosche*.

The other mainstay of *mafia* power is, as mentioned, the *partito*. Calderone also describes in detail the ways and functions of a modern *partito*. His *cosca*, led by his brother Giuseppe, had a strong connection to the Catanian entrepreneurial family, the Costanzo, on the basis of exchange of services. The Calderones protected the wealthy Costanzo family from kidnapping and blackmail and protected the firm's large construction sites and plants against extortion attempts. They obtained public contracts for them, often through their mafia contacts, mainly in Palermo. They conducted dealings with *mafiosi* from other territories when the Costanzos were carrying out building contracts in other provinces of Sicily. They intimidated workers who wanted to strike and carried out attacks on competing firms to throw them off balance. Although they were paid for these services, the protective screen against prosecution which the Costanzos could provide was much more important and more valued.

The Costanzos owned a hunting ground and a seaside hotel, where they entertained Carabinieri officers, judges and politicians and brought them together with *mafiosi*. A public prosecutor lived rent-free in one of their houses. One of their managers conducted an election campaign for the Christian Democrat candidate Milazzo with their money. Their money was used to bribe useful people (a secretary at police headquarters received 500,000 lire, a public prosecutor 30 million). As compensation, a politician would put in a good word to a judge, a Carabinieri colonel would organise the transfer of an overly diligent captain, a public prosecutor would strike certain names off the wanted list, a secretary would give warning of a planned arrest.<sup>7</sup> It is the volume of such seemingly banal details which must be kept in mind to understand the power of the mafia phenomenon.

To say it again, the Mafia is not a cancerous growth which by chance has begun to grow in a healthy body. It exists in complete symbiosis with the masses of protectors, collaborators, informants and debtors. That is the humus of the Cosa Nostra.<sup>8</sup>

And this humus reached up high, through many varying networks of power. Through the Socialist and Christian Democratic parties, in particular the Andreotti faction and –possibly – to the man himself; through organisations as shrouded in mystery as the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, Opus Dei, many Masonic Lodges and the most criminal of them all, the notorious secret Lodge, Propaganda Due, through to the executives of a variety of power hierarchies in the state and in business associ-

<sup>7</sup> See Arlacchi 1992, 175-214

<sup>8</sup> Translated from Falcone/Padovani 1993, 88

ations.<sup>9</sup> Even at the highest levels, the *mafiosi* were always concerned with neutralising the process of justice and with influencing legislation and the regulation of the economy. In the last two decades, two new factors have been added to the existing ones: first, the enormous financial power of mafia entrepreneurs, which resulted from drug trafficking and made them independent of some connections; and, second, direct terrorist threats against members of the state apparatus, which had been very uncommon previously. These factors led to a greater autonomy of the mafia in dealings with political figures, but, as a result, also to a weakening of networks and ultimately to crisis.

### The Reciprocal Influence of Myth and Reality

A Calabrian chicken decided to become a member of the mafia. He went to a mafia Minister to get a letter of recommendation, but was told that the mafia did not exist. He went to a mafia judge, but he also told him that the mafia did not exist. Finally he went to a mafia mayor, and he too told him that the mafia did not exist. So the chicken went back to the henhouse, and when the other chickens asked, he answered that the mafia did not exist. Then all the other chickens thought he had become a member of the mafia and became afraid of him (Luigi Malerba).

In mentioning structures, one cannot avoid at least touching on the century-old debate about the theory of the mafia as one big secret society. The historical material seems clear to me: there is organisation, but not “the organisation.”<sup>10</sup> In recent times, however, the confessions of so-called *pentiti* who have testified before examining magistrates suggest again more organisational formality. One must respect these testimonies, but, in so doing, neither discard definite knowledge about the past, nor abandon all scepticism with regard to the present day. First, as to the name of the organisation: earlier it was obvious that it was called “mafia.” Today it seems equally

<sup>9</sup> See Violante 1992, 113–118. At the end of 1992, charges were brought against 350 members of Freemason Lodges for supporting mafia organizations; see Observatoire Géopolitique des Drogues 1993, 185. Incidentally, the Catholic Church played a most inglorious role in this humus in that it accepted the *mafiosi* as loyal servants and sponsors of religious celebrations and, thus, helped to legitimize the position of the *mafiosi*. This attitude has a long tradition, as from 1870 (the year of the conquest of Rome by the young kingdom of Italy) up until Mussolini’s concordate with the Vatican in 1929, the Church was an adversary of the liberal state. And since the end of the Second World War, the Church was bound to the Christian Democrats who, in turn, relied on mafia connections. Only recently have the high clergy been able to make the decision to publicly pass judgement on the doings of the mafia; see Gambetta 1992, 52–61.

<sup>10</sup> For this differentiation see Cressey 1998. In *Fascism and the Mafia*, Duggan has again, with a great deal of material and strong arguments, dissected the theory of the mafia as one big secret society [Duggan 1989, particularly pp. 15–91]. He has also analyzed the functions of this theory: to simplify the interpretation of complicated courses of events on an island which was so difficult to govern; to stigmatize subcultural rival powers; to justify central state repression and to explain the failure of police, the justice system and government by reference to a sinister and perfectly organized enemy.

clear that in reality it is known as *Cosa Nostra*. So far as this last name is concerned, one can confidently say that it was only recently imported from America, where it was misunderstood during the hearings of the McClellan Commission (1957-1959) to be the proper name of an organisation. This was then propagated by the media.

The structure of the organisation is regularly presented as follows (and this corresponds broadly to schemata which have been set out for decades in American criminology textbooks and which appear in the press and on television). The *Cosa Nostra* consists of families which are autonomous in their respective territories. All members call themselves *uomini d'onore*, but the families are structured hierarchically. The basic members are known as *soldati*. From their own ranks they elect a *rappresentante*, a boss who represents the family. The chief appoints his deputy and *capi-decina* (heads of ten; that is, non-commissioned officers) and a *consigliere* (adviser). The *rappresentanti* represent the families in a provincial commission and representatives of the provincial commissions make up the most senior committee, the regional commission (*Regionale* or *Cupola*). New members are accepted in a ceremony marked by traditional initiation rites. Within the organisation, a strictly sanctioned system of norms is in place which commands, above all, absolute obedience to the *capi-decina* and the *rappresentante*, complete honesty and exchange of information on the inside and total secrecy on the outside and first loyalty to the organisation, before and above all other loyalties.<sup>11</sup>

Doubts about this exacting system are reasonable, particularly as the *pentiti* maintain, usually with regret, that they only came to know a deteriorated version of this old tradition – one with less formality; in which elections are decided in advance; in which initiation ceremonies no longer impress the hard-boiled new breed to whom violence is nothing new; and in which the only things that count are blood ties and the rights of the powerful.<sup>12</sup>

That is by no means an indication that all the abovementioned descriptions of the structure and inner life of a *Cosa Nostra* should be dismissed as pure fantasy. Rather, one can see here a circular interaction between mythology and reality. The media world (including judicial and criminological discourses, but above all novels, films and television) takes inspiration from real persons, cliques and events which it embellishes, idealises, condemns, and portrays so impressively that those who are depicted in turn attempt to stay true to the portrayal. Thus, *mafiosi* try to translate

<sup>11</sup> See Arlacchi 1992, 21-27, 52-61; Falcone and Padovani 1993, 94 ff.; Gambetta 1992, 150 ff., 366-372

<sup>12</sup> See Calderone's numerous relevant statements in Arlacchi 1992, for instance on pp. 22, 38, 57 ff., 105-107, 125 ff., 270 ff. Regarding the discrepancy between theory and reality in the organizational structure of the Red Brigades, a good parallel case, see Hess 1991, 113 ff.

their portrayal in *The Godfather* into reality, or try to live out the reality of a secret society “the way the judges who interrogated me defined it.”<sup>13</sup>

That can often bring tangible benefits. Gaining membership of the mafia or the *Cosa Nostra* through mutual recognition as *uomini d'onore*, which might sometimes be honoured in a more or less formal admission ceremony, offers not only a flattering image, but also considerable practical advantages, because each individual *mafioso*, in the performance of his function, profits from the fearful reputation of the organisation. The reciprocal recognition as “legitimate” *cosche* restricts the operations of competing gangs which are regarded as non-*Cosa Nostra*. In addition, the portrayal of a central executive authority as is constantly suggested in the media, has a certain attraction for the *mafiosi*.

In any case, there has always been a considerable need for regulation between the *cosche*, a need which has been constantly increasing since the 1950s because of increased mobility; the broader integration of the political and social life of Sicily; and as a result of commercial projects throughout the provinces.

Since the start of the 1970s, for example, Giuseppe Calderone, *capo* of a *cosca* from Catania, had been pushing for an inter-provincial body to avoid or reduce conflict and to facilitate cooperation. In 1975, the so-called Regional Commission brought together for the first time the chiefs of the leading *cosche* from six provinces and elected Calderone secretary. According to his brother's account, Giuseppe Calderone had far-reaching plans to create a *Cosa Nostra* according to the media image: the oligarchic leadership should be extended not only as advisory and arbitration authority but also as a decision-making authority. They were to be able to enforce their decisions not by resorting to troops of the member *cosche*, but with the help of a special panel of 50 people chosen from all the *cosche* under the command of the secretary. Principles of organisational structure and standards of conduct for members were to be established in a statute. A standard which was particularly important – that no *cosca* could have more than two brothers as members or more than two blood relatives in the leadership – is symptomatic of the greatly desired intention: the creation of an effective modern organisation independent of traditional blood ties. The Regional Commission existed for a while and possibly still exists today, but obviously has not achieved its main purpose: internal pacification. Calderone's modernisation plans never had a chance against the needs of the local and provincial strong-arm men for independence or against the power of traditional blood ties and clientele

<sup>13</sup> “Come l'hanno definite i giudici che mi hanno interrogato,” says Calderone [Arlacchi 1992, 83. For the popularity of the *Godfather* see also pp. 23 and 161]. For the whole argument mainly Gambetta 1992, 178-218.

connections. Even so, the media for their part embellished these timid attempts at centralisation into an all-powerful *Cupola*.<sup>14</sup>

## Functions: Mafia as Para-State

When you think closely about it, in character, the mafia is nothing other than the expression of a longing for order and thereby for government (Giovanni Falcone).

In an ingenious essay, the American historian Charles Tilly described governments as protection rackets, as organised crime.<sup>15</sup> Taking the example of the formation of European states during early modern times, he analyses the functions which the introduction of organised force had (and in principle still has – even if modified and more latent): war as defence against rivals who pose a threat from outside the home territory, within which the ruler strives for a monopoly over force; the formation of states as the fulfilment of this monopoly against internal rivals; protection, above all, of economically powerful clients against the enemies within (for example, repression of social revolutions) or outside the territory (for example, trade wars); and finally, taxation levies to finance this monopoly. To understand the mafia phenomenon, it is useful to once again reverse the perspectives and, instead of seeing protection rackets in the process of government, to recognise government processes in protection rackets.

The central purpose of a *mafioso* or a *mafia cosca* is always to gain a monopoly of power and protection in a designated territory and to maintain it. Mafia murders and mafia wars are, above all, signs of the struggle for power in a territory or of arguments over territorial borders. Internal palace revolts and succession struggles are almost endemic, and alliances of civil war factions with rival external power groups are common. Wars of conquest are less common. The last major mafia war was fought between two alliances from 1981 to 1983: the large Palermo *cosche* Inzerillo and Bontade, with their allies in the provinces, on the one hand; and the *cosca* from Corleone (Luciano Liggio, Salvatore Riina, Bernardo Provenzano, and so on), the Greco family from Palermo, the *cosca* of Nitto Santapaola in Catania, and so on, on the other. From this war, which in 1982 alone had a toll of 300 dead and 150 missing,

<sup>14</sup> See Arlacchi 1992, 122–137. In illegal circumstances, larger organizations generally cause larger difficulties and risks and the tendency towards smaller enterprises is encouraged. As to the problems and the downfall of the Neapolitan Nuova Camorra Organizzata under Cutolo, which grew too quickly and was too large, or the Bontade cosca in Palermo, two good examples of this theory, see Gambetta 1992, 134 and 341.

<sup>15</sup> See Tilly 1985

the Corleonesi, the men from the small agricultural town of Corleone south-east of Palermo, emerged as the dominant power. The “dictatorship” of the Corleonesi in their attempt at centralisation during the 1980s resembled the attempt at an oligarchic trans-territorial authority of the Regional Commission or *Cupola* in the past. The ensuing events lead to the assumption that this attempt, too, came to nothing in the end. Under the particular circumstances of illegality, power monopolies seem to survive only in smaller territories.

Here, of course, “monopoly” means only the exclusion of other *mafiosi*. The state remains as permanent competition for the supply of protection and the collection of relevant moneys. A good example of the functional equivalence of mafia and police is mentioned by Calderone:

At the meeting with the other big developers Carmelo Costanzo constantly made it clear to everyone not to mess around with him, because the *mafia* was behind him [...] On the construction sites of the developer Rendo we caused a lot of damage in order to get money out of him and to subjugate him, to get him under our power [...] Also to do Costanzo a favour. But we didn't manage to subjugate him because he had police support. He was very big in the area of police and justice.<sup>16</sup>

Competition is precisely the sore point for a convinced supporter of the powerful legal state like the judge Falcone. “To say it again, the mafia does not have to be combated because of its values, which may seem warranted in a disintegrating society, but because of its very essence: there cannot be two systems of government in one society.”<sup>17</sup> The mafia system was only able to develop because the protective functions of a defective state were not put to adequate use. Once established, the mafia system cannot be removed just like that, even though the state could now do all its work. Economic and political life has adjusted to this system, and it has achieved its own strong momentum because not only the mafia protagonists, but also many others, profit from it.

The protective services the mafia provides for its clients comprise protection against criminal activities, negotiation and authoritative settlement of conflicts, the guarantee of contractual arrangements, and so on. It is difficult to assess the extent to which these services are genuine, and appreciated by the recipients as a fair compensation for their payments, and to what extent the services are fictitious, in that protection is offered against a danger which is threatened by the protector himself, so that the payments are extortion money. While common discourse on the mafia stresses only the second scenario, it might well be that the extent of genuine exchange

<sup>16</sup> Translated from Arlacchi 1992, 187-

<sup>17</sup> Translated from Falcone and Padovani 1993, 137.

is underestimated. This is the central argument in Gambetta's *La mafia siciliana*, but the following sentence is already found in Max Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Economy and Society):

The payments in practice often take on the character of subscriptions in return for which reciprocal services, namely guarantees of safety, are offered: The statement of a Neapolitan industrialist to me about 20 years ago reflecting on the effectiveness of the Camorra for businesses is relevant here: "Signore, the Camorra takes X lire from me each month but guarantees security – the State takes ten times X lire and guarantees nothing."<sup>18</sup>

There again, one could take the other perspective and see the blackmail factor in state income taxation. We are forced to pay taxes and have little to no influence on the way those taxes are used. Some of the purposes they are used for we might abhor. Other services for which we have paid are either withheld from us or of poor quality (for example, security) or we must struggle arduously to obtain them (one thinks of the often-difficult and expensive justice system). It would also be interesting to compare protection money with insurance premiums: here, also, we pay regularly, and in the majority of cases we receive no service in return, because we (fortunately) do not need it or because the insurer avoids payment.

Obviously, the protection money which is raised from small business people only makes up a small part of *mafiosi* income. When they demand protection money, therefore, it is mainly as a sign of subjugation, to signify recognition of their authority in a particular territory. As previously mentioned, these days the market for public contracts or European Union subsidies and some illegal markets, particularly the drug market, are financially much more significant.

It is in the context of these illegal markets that the mafia system achieves its greatest significance as a quasi-state. Illegality means that the trading in these markets is more uncertain and carries higher risks than in legal ones. Rights of ownership of goods are not documented anywhere and possession is precarious because of the constant threat of confiscation by the police and theft by rivals. Capital investment is also often very high. The quality of the goods varies greatly, is not standardised and is not subject to any official quality control. Contracts are entered into only verbally, are not confirmed in writing and are, therefore, always open to a variety of interpretations. The calibre of trading partners is difficult to scrutinise, as each reveals as little information as possible. Only physical persons serve as partners, not corporations, so that the enterprise disappears with the entrepreneur. Sources of mistrust, deception and conflict therefore abound, so that dealings in illegal mar-

<sup>18</sup> Translated from Weber 1976, 114 ff.



kets are constantly characterised by pseudo-legal arguments about responsibilities and breaches of duty.<sup>19</sup> The illegality also means that the whole state legal system, with its arbitration and law enforcement apparatus, cannot be used. On the one hand, the need for a mechanism which in the broadest sense guarantees contracts is greater than in the legal economy. On the other hand, recourse to the state mechanism is almost completely impossible – I say “almost”, because the state mechanism can still be activated by informing and can thus be used to destroy competitors.

The two methods which in this scenario are employed in all illegal trades in order to reduce the high cost of transactions (procurement of information and secrecy, meeting of conditions, settlement of disputes and so on) are trust and violence. In providing trust, the bonds of solidarity groups with non-economic loyalties play an enormous role: family ties, mainly, but also local and regional ties, nationality, religion and political persuasion. The closer these ties, the more reliable the information about potential business partners and the more confident one can be that they will keep to arrangements and maintain confidentiality, because sanctions might include expulsion from the community – which often means not only economic, but also social, ruin. In illegal (and sometimes also in legal and quasi-legal) markets, this gives a great advantage to those people who are supported by a so-called trade diaspora, settlements of a community scattered by migration which, although geographically separated, feel connected (Jews, Armenians, southern Italians and Chinese are the best-known examples). The second method, as mentioned, is violence, or better, as the actual use of force is often costly and might even be counterproductive, the convincing threat of violence. *Mafiosi* employ both methods. To recognise one another as *uomo d'onore* initiates a bond of trust. And the knowledge that a *mafioso* will vouch for the soundness and honesty of a business partner or the security of a loan or an investment in a limited partnership (as often occurs in the drug trade) in word and, of course, if needed, in action, creates a certain reliability in a world where this is a rarity.

To fulfil this function, a *mafioso* must be seen as able to win through in conflict. His reputation gives him, today as before, a good deal of his strength, which would be exhausted fairly quickly if it had to be demonstrated in every situation by the use of violence. Here the previously-mentioned notoriety of the mystical *Cosa Nostra* helps, but a personal reputation which is beyond all doubt is essential. For the *mafioso* this means constant work on his reputation in regard to efficiency, precision in dealing, ruthless brutality, omniscience and omnipresence – but also in regard to facets

<sup>19</sup> See Reuter 1983, 109-131; Arlacchi 1989, 244 ff.; Gambetta 1992, 333-343.

of a very traditional honour such as male courage, keeping his word and leading a well-ordered family life (and most particularly in this most personal aspect he cannot afford any failures).<sup>20</sup>

### Functions: Mafia as Adventure Capitalism

The attempt to monopolise illegal violence in a territory and to rule a territory is the special characteristic of a *mafioso* and the essence of any definition of “mafia.” Mafia is a power structure and, as such, is of a quite different quality from what is commonly known as organised crime (which in most cases consists mainly of cooperation for the purpose of material profit). Psychologically, the deciding factor lies here too.

The actual goal is power. The sinister passion of the *capi-mafia* is not the hunger for money, but the hunger for power. The fugitive bosses could live in luxury overseas until the end of their days. But instead they stay in Palermo – constantly hunted, ever in danger of being caught by the police or being killed by competitors – only to avoid losing control over their territory and falling from their pedestal. Marino Mannoia once said to me: “It is often believed that people work with the Cosa Nostra for the money. But that is only partly true. Do you know why I became an *uomo d'onore*? Because before I had been a nobody in Palermo and then after-wards where I went, heads bowed. You can't value that in money.”<sup>21</sup>

To separate this political use of violence from the use of violence as an economic factor – not only for the benefit of clients of mafia services, but also for individual financial enrichment – is difficult and can only be done analytically. *Mafiosi* have always tried to use their positions of power in order to monopolise or at least improve certain opportunities for financial gains. In the 1970s, these efforts attained a new dimension with the spread of the so-called “entrepreneurial mafia.”<sup>22</sup>

Since that time, unique hybrid phenomena have been noticeable in the economy of the Italian south (Sicily, Calabria, and Campania): modern construction, trade, and service enterprises which are technically up to date and which operate in expanding

<sup>20</sup> The *mafioso* guards this reputation, is himself convinced of its veracity and sets it against, for instance, the dishonourable behavior of politicians: “It is hard for a politician to become an *uomo d'onore*. Within the Cosa Nostra there is a strong dislike of politicians because they cannot be trusted, because they do not keep their promises, because they constantly play the smart alec. They are false people without principles,” says Calderone in Arlacchi 1992, 208 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Translated from Scarpinato 1992, 94.

<sup>22</sup> See Arlacchi 1989.

sectors of the economy, but which show traditional, or downright archaic, elements and which, above all, employ unscrupulous physical violence as a business method.

The great success and the extraordinary growth of such enterprises are based on competitive advantages which they gain simply through the use of violence or through other illegal activities. The most important competitive advantage lies in discouraging competitors through more or less explicit threats and, when necessary, through attacks on plant installations and staff. This mechanism functions above all in the competition for government contracts or in the allocation of subcontracts in the major industries of housing, harbour, motorway and road construction, in tourist towns, and in the transport sector.

A second competitive advantage is that mafia enterprises can count on reduced labour costs, in that they evade social security contributions, pay no overtime and prevent trade union activities; in short, they intimidate not only the competition, but also the workers. A third advantage is the considerable financial resources at their disposal, which do not come from the accumulation of the usual profits or from bank loans for which interest would have to be paid, but from illegal activities outside the legal business sector (first from cigarette, and later from drug, smuggling).

In addition to the use of violence, a further traditional element which is foreign to modern capitalism, is the organisation of mafia enterprises on a basis of blood relationships, a type of “family communism” with common ownership and without clear separation of the finances of the family and the business. The business relationship spans continents – efficiently reducing the cost of transactions – via family contacts.

Also characteristic of the mafia style of business is that the enterprising *mafioso* is only interested in fast wealth for which he does not have to work, but gains through a few speculative operations. He takes enormous risks and is constantly under the threat of death or prison. As quickly as he earns his fortune in these cases, he (and also the family) loses it.

Considering the mostly humble beginnings of the *mafiosi* of today, as of the past, the fascination with power and with money is understandable. One may presume, though, that with successful *mafiosi* we are taking a selection of personalities for whom risk has not only a functional, but also an expressive value, a very particular fascination. A sort of implicit existential philosophy is expressed in the answer to the question of a judge, whether the life of the *mafioso* Salvatore Inzerillo had been worthwhile, as he had to die so young:

Inzerillo dies at 37. That is true. But his 37 years are like 80 of any normal person. Inzerillo lived well. He got a lot out of life. Others will not even have one hundredth of these things. It's not a sin to die so young when one has done, experienced and

had all that Inzerillo did, experienced and was able to have. He did not die weary of life or dissatisfied. He died satisfied. That is the difference.<sup>23</sup>

According to Max Weber's terminology, the *mafioso* is an adventure capitalist, occupied in the "acquisition of capital as an adventure" and full of "that ethos of adventure which scorns the barriers of ethics." And the field of business in which the mafia entrepreneur is active, is that of adventure capitalism "which is oriented around political opportunity and irrational speculation."<sup>24</sup> Here, it is the construction and transport areas in which there are unusual financial opportunities for parasitic profits through particular political conditions, namely state and European development funds and government contracts, and, of course, the drug market, in which prohibition pushes the risks and the profits into the realm of fantasy.

But I repeat that the economic activity of a *mafioso* is a secondary factor. His position and connections as a *mafioso* are very helpful in the process, but he does not carry on this financial activity as a *mafioso*. This is particularly clear in drug trading. All the *pentiti* have stressed that the involvement in drug trading is not a matter for *cosche* or for the *Cosa Nostra*, but rather a private matter of individuals in which they also regularly work with non-mafia people. The business of the *cosche* is, as mentioned, the power over a territory and, in that sense, mafia is something different and more than organised crime in the current sense (it is more the initial target of criminal prosecution to reduce it to that).

## Epilogue

The scholars who contribute to this special issue were asked what impact, what consequences, what kind of influence their research and their publications have had. Above I have mentioned the curious reciprocal influence of the reality of the mafia, on the one hand, and the fictional treatment of it, on the other. With scholarly books a possible influence seems much more difficult to trace (apart from the influence on the career of the scholars themselves which sometimes, as in my case, was considerable; all the authors in this issue of *Sociologica*, in a sense, have to be grateful to the mafia!).

My book was in general well received, translated into Italian, English and Spanish and has had altogether until now twelve editions. I must admit that I was proud of the prefaces of Leonardo Sciascia, Nicola Tranfaglia, and Donald Cressey and the dozens of quite favorable reviews (including a very nice one of Eric Hobsbawm). I

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Arlacchi 1989, 132.

<sup>24</sup> Quotations translated from Weber 1978, 43 and 61.

think the book may have helped to see some myths of the mafia in a very skeptical way and further a rigorous sociological analysis of organized crime.

But all that concerns a rather restricted scientific community and not actual politics and law enforcement. I guess that we scholars have to be quite humble in this respect. Giovanni Falcone reports that, when he got seriously interested in the mafia, he read Cesare Mori's *Con la mafia ai ferri corti* as well as "the sociologist Henner Hess."<sup>25</sup> I guess that Mori helped him more than I did. And this is probably true for Dalla Chiesa as well as for all the others who are really *con la mafia ai ferri corti*.

I must admit that I will read with great interest what my colleagues have to say about that.

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## Approaching and Explaining the Mafia Phenomenon

### Attempts of a Sociologist

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**Abstract:** The paper reports on how the author got introduced to the phenomenon of the mafia by the eminent writer and social reformer Danilo Dolci and then conducted his empirical research in the 1960s. This research included – besides interviews – above all a thorough study of never before used material in the Archivio di Stato di Palermo, material that was organized and interpreted with the help of sociological concepts and presented in the book *Mafia* (published in German in 1970 and translated into Italian, English, and Spanish). The main contributions this book added to the study of the mafia are here summarized in a short outline of the careers of mafiosi, the structure of mafiose groupings and the functions of mafiose behavior as para-state and adventure capitalism. Added are some reflections on the reciprocal influence of media myths and reality as well as some tentative remarks on recent developments.

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*Keywords:* Careers; group structures; para-state; adventure capitalism; media myths and reality.

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