

[Mafie del nord. Strategie criminali e contesti locali]

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The Social Reproduction of the Mafias: Mechanisms and Processes

This book lends itself to various interpretations, all of considerable interest. The most logical and immediate one satisfies the need to learn about a social process that till now has been little and badly investigated, or almost always within narrow territorial and temporal limits: namely the breeding grounds within Italy, rates of expansion, modes and routes of those criminal phenomena (Mafia, 'Ndrangheta, Camorra, and their variants) that until a few decades ago existed and thrived almost exclusively in their territories of origin, the regions of southern Italy. Whoever is interested in this type of literature - I would suppose the vast majority of those who take this book in hand - will find in the seven chapters from III to IX a careful, intelligent reconstruction of the Mafia's principal processes of social reproduction (*Mafia* being a term I use here as elsewhere as a shortcut to refer to the various criminal organizations under examination): from the case of lower Latium to those of Lombardy, Piedmont, Western Liguria, Reggio Emilia, Prato and Veneto. Beyond the wealth of narratives, I was struck and stimulated by the way Sciarrone and his researchers orient themselves in the cognitive process, and by the results this work strategy has achieved. So I will focus especially on this, though here and there turning my attention - for the sake of exemplification and support of specific arguments - to this or that case study.

The methodological and theoretical approach, which Sciarrone summarizes on p. XIV and then develops in the first chapter, aims entirely at "discovering" and understanding the processes of the mafias' social reproduction. The research query is clear, and it is posited entirely within a classic formulation of the sociological tradition: to understand change, understand why society changes. The research is therefore not about criminal sociology, as it may strictly be defined, but is the result of applying the best sociological tools and, I would say, those of the social sciences, to investigating a definite social process and the mechanisms that nourish it: the reproduction, in some territories of central and northern Italy, of mafia organizations typically and historically rooted in the southern regions. The specification I have made regarding disciplinary collocation may appear superfluous, if not useless, but I hope that the few points I examine will clarify the reasons for it.

The ideal-typical approach. Sciarrone (his collaborators will pardon me this repeated synecdoche, but it is expressively easier to incorporate them in the editor's name) uses often this classic Weberian tool. In my opinion, its application provides him with the most valuable interpretive key of his whole research. The reasons are varied. Sciarrone, who is interested in reconstructing the mechanisms of reproduction of the mafias in their *new* enclaves, quickly realized that the study of those processes, investigated so to speak in their nascent state, supply it with this ideal-typical tool, usable not only to study that process, but more generally to reconstruct and evaluate the ways in which the mafias - the new ones as well as the more traditional ones - *establish* themselves¹. It is in this ideal-typical frame that Sciarrone and his collaborators gradually collocate the results of their various case studies. I will cite some of the more interesting ones, arranging them by analysis context.

Space. Seeing in what territories the mafias expand, at what rate, in what ways and by what paths, is the best method for understanding the mechanisms and processes of social reproduction. The case studies obviously provide a variety of indications, but all are highly dependent on the features of the *local host societies*: type of production structure, law enforcement effectiveness, activatable social networks, ethnically homogeneous settlements, and so

¹ See especially par.4 of the first chapter.

on. The diversification of these features favors one or another type of mafia expansion: simple *infiltration* in some areas (see the case of Tuscany) and *entrenchment* in others (in the case of Emilia Romagna); how these different modes and action strategies for “insertion” in local societies are seen to prevail: through *imitation*, according to a very common logic in the processes of social mobility (the theory of reference groups comes immediately to mind), or through *hybridization*, if the cultural environment and social distances allow *connubium* and *commercium* between aliens and natives.

Physical space and social space, in their inextricable intertwining, stand in the way as obstacles or, vice versa, facilitate very differentiated means and strategies of action. While, for example, the geographical proximity between Calabria, Campania and Latium offers an easy explanation for the greater presence in Latium of the ‘Ndrangheta and the Camorra, in the long run - to which Sciarrone and his staff constantly pay close attention, so rare in today’s atemporal sociology - in reality there has been a succession of historical phases (the dominion of the large estates, the land reclamation of the 1930’s, the post-war construction boom, etc.) which so uniquely changed the face of the Latium region, each area thereby exerting a force of attraction towards different “populations” and criminal groups.

While not a decisive factor, the smaller geographical distance can be a help, but nothing more, in establishing long-lasting relationships, exchanges, material and non-material support between target and source areas. The nature and constitution of these ties present various points of interest, which the research takes into account. Here I recall one in particular: that the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the latest expansion areas can become a factor of “criminal” modernization of the more traditional areas of origin. This process, very common and much studied in standard migration phenomena², by no accident finds a correspondence in those investigated in this book: demonstrating, in my opinion, how the strategies and models of action are to some extent independent of the ordinary or criminal nature of groups “on the move” and of their lawful or unlawful ends.

Time. As I have already mentioned, Sciarrone explicitly adopts a process-type perspective, which moves indistinctly - as Elias teaches - among the levels of individuals and families, clans and groups, organizations and local societies. Perhaps the case study where the process approach is applied most successfully is the one on the Canavese area (Chap. V), where the expansion of the criminal element (in this case the ‘Ndrangheta) takes on different forms within a relationship shifting between economics and politics (p.179).

At the individual-family level (to use a category of Schumpeter’s)³ the weightier processes are identifiable in the unfolding of migratory chains (with consequent selection of “personnel” on the basis of family and clan affiliations) and/or in the changing conditions of the local target societies, evaluated more or less favorably for the development of *criminal careers*. Their typological representation takes into account another mechanism of Mafia enclaves in non-traditional areas: *adaptation*. According to a Parsons-type biological and social principle, the criminal will pursue his career positively to the extent that he is able to adapt to the host environment - since, as Sciarrone notes, the time required for changes in the context conditions are inevitably longer than those sufficient for the agents to “fit in”, for better or worse, with the rules of the target environment (pp.214-15).

At the local society level, Reggio Emilia, where the Calabrese ‘Ndrangheta has prospered, is a good example of the usefulness of employing process-type reconstructions of events. The crisis of the large estates, which had stricken the Crotona area in the post-war period, though at first it had given rise to proto-mafia phenomena fueled by layoffs of the Barons’⁴ security personnel, subsequently became a “pioneer” activity⁵: which in the case

2 See the study on Reggio Emilia and - for the description of some international cases - *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy*, by Anna Lee Saxenian (2007), «Journal of Economic Geography», 7 (1).

3 I refer to J.A. Schumpeter’s essay (1927), *Die sozialen Klassen im ethnisch-homogenen Milieu*, in «Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik», LVII, 1-67 (translated into English as *Social Classes in an Ethnically Homogenous Environment*, in *Imperialism and Social Classes*, New York, A.M. Kelly, 1951).

4 It is a widely known process in sociology (from Schumpeter to Mosca, to cite its major proponents), according to which, when a social group can no longer exercise its function, is in definitive decline or utilizes its former know-how - in this case, the specialized use of violence - to “create” a new function for itself.

5 See p.265 and all of par. 2 *Il ponte migratorio*, on the case of Reggio Emilia (chap. IV).

of Emilia Romagna opened the way, as often happens in processes of mobility, to larger and “purer” groups of criminal elements. In this initial phase of expansion there prevailed what might be called a process of primitive accumulation, financed by kidnappings, drug dealing, extortion, etc., followed by a gradual stabilization, with reinvestments of “dirty” capital, bribery, consolidation of favor-bartering with members of the political and economic establishment, to the setting up of a social network capable of managing the power acquired with little risk and practically no need to resort to acts of criminal violence⁶.

Culture, values and localized social networks. There is a courageous research question to which Sciarrone’s group attempts, in large part successfully, to give an answer: whether or not, in addition to the important material conditions that favor the expansion of the mafia system, other more intangible conditions also play an important role. The answer is unequivocal: the mafias expand successfully wherever local values, ideologies and cultures are, as it were, ready to receive them, since there are already present in their own cultural system elements (and practices) syntonetic with elements (and practices) of the mafia culture. There are two cases, the Venetian one and the Tuscan one, which in different ways lend themselves well to an exemplification. For the sake of brevity, I will consider this aspect along with another that deserves attention on its own, namely the relationship between economic crisis and penetration of the Mafia. I do so because the crisis condition - and in particular that of the long, serious crisis we are still going through - sheds a sharper light on the mechanisms we are dealing with. Which are essentially two, differing from each other, but which in a crisis situation can produce the same results. First: the informality which in the districts in question often accompanies economic and commercial transactions (the legendary handshake that seals a deal) leaves the way open for opportunistic behavior that in times of crisis (but perhaps not only) have a greater attraction, to the point of verging upon unlawful conduct or at any rate where the boundary between what is lawful and unlawful becomes blurred⁷. Second, on a cultural level, if we consider that the mafias’ choices of territories to penetrate often take into account - consciously or not - the value standards and lifestyles of the population, what happens is that the unlawful conduct meets no effective “moral” resistance because it fortuitously plays on shared values⁸: which, if in normal situations these in part take multiple forms, under the pressure of the crisis they converge into a single form.

Violence and tradition. The strength of the mafias, their capacity to manage their affairs, their need to obtain obedience from their followers as from those they harass or corrupt, is based on two factors: violence and tradition. Both absolve the function of keeping the mafia associations together; both, although in a different way, contribute to maintaining order in the target area. It is interesting to note how Sciarrone makes clear reference, in writing about violence, to Weber’s famous statement on the (legitimate) use the State can make of it when other means are unable to obtain obedience against possible resistance. What emerges from the case studies⁹ is that, while the criminal organizations equip themselves for a specialized use of violence, its exercise is actually a last resort, to be employed only when all other attempts have failed to achieve satisfactory results. What we see therefore is the belief that the use of violence by the mafia is in the last analysis considered “legitimate” when the Mafia society-state is at risk of disintegrating or disappearing: as demonstrated by the fact that up to that limit the preference is to *threaten* violence rather than exercise it¹⁰.

6 The dissolution of the large estates triggered a not dissimilar process, except obviously for the different plane of illegality on which it was enacted, to the events well narrated by Brusco, Capecchi and others related to the crisis of the Officine Reggiane and the consequent spread of worker and technical know-how over the surrounding area, which led quickly to the development of an efficient, thriving system of small metalworking industries.

7 See especially the case of Prato pp.304-305.

8 It is a kind of reasoning dear to Parsons as interpreter of social change: an operation of cultural change is successful to the extent that it refers to an already present value, of which it offers a different formulation.

9 Again, see especially the case of Prato, p. 325.

10 See for example the case of the Veneto region (pp.346-347), and the Tuscan case of Prato (p.324). It is no accident that newspapers speak of a State within the State, of State-Mafia negotiations, of occupation of the State, etc. Not without reason, I think, as in all the cases studied the constant attempt of mafia groups to infiltrate and condition the political and institutional sectors has demonstrated, to

Even rituals and traditions fill in to perform important tasks. The research makes two interesting observations. The first is that in the new Mafia enclaves ritual and tradition are more preponderant than in their areas of origin, almost reinforcing an identity that is felt as isolated, estranged and threatened, and therefore tightening internal discipline through a mystical reinforcement of collective identity. The second is that use is made of symbols, rituals and instrumental exhibitions - all of which Sciarrone defines as an "imaginary dimension" - in order to present *mafiosity* in the best light possible for achieving criminal accreditation, either by competing mafia groups or by the local society .

Sciarrone's research offers many other stimulating points, but the reader will have understood where, in my opinion, the value of this book lies: in Author's ability to make the best use of the theoretical and conceptual tools which sociology and the social sciences make available for responding to research questions. This ability shows through in all of his analyses, and especially in the interpretations of their results: an ability of which Sciarrone does not always reveal the disciplinary ascendancies, even if of certain derivation, since they have obviously become organic parts of his way of thinking and working. Sometimes, it is true, he relies on usages that are widespread in the sociological mainstream, for example when he resorts to the category of social capital (which in my opinion will never be criticized enough, especially for its tendentious and misleading name) in support of his interpretation of the Mafia processes of expansion. But these are venial sins. There remains the matter of a research that delves deeply into the social mechanisms of mafia reproduction, following paths whose roots strike deep even in the far off history of the lands of origin. A book to read for the many things it says about the mafias of the north, but also a paradigmatic text - unfortunately rare in the Italian and international production of these years - of how good sociological research can be done. I immediately correct myself: how research and social science can be done.

(Paolo Giovannini)

wit to become a State within the State.

