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COLLOQUIUM

Invisible things

Deborah PUCCIO-DEN, *CNRS (LAIOS-ILAC), EHESS*

Of all the changes of language a traveler in
distant lands must face, none equals that
which waits him in the City of Hypatia,
because the change regards not words, but
things

– Italo Calvino, *Invisible cities* ([1972] 1997: 40)

In Italo Calvino's novel, Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan that a traveler should not be concerned with finding correspondences between words and things when encountering novel places, but rather consider that *one* word may address *two* different things. Likewise, when the anthropologist faces questions such as “Am I closer to a jaguar than to another man?”, “May we share some qualities with mountains or forests?” (Descola [2005] 2013), he or she is probing systems of categorization of the real and the unreal, challenging the borders between visible and invisible things. Embarking on a similar ontological and epistemological revisitation of the umbrella term “mafia” is the actual challenge of the *mafiacraft* project.

Take the following example. A judge asks the defendant Mini at the 1883 Amoroso trial: “Weren't you part of the mafia?” and the defendant replies: “I don't know what that means.” One could be tempted to gloss the response as a *lie*. This excerpt from a historical trial, the epigraph to Henner Hess's book about the Mafia ([1970] 1998), was never subject to a proper scrutiny to understand what Mini's *refusal of signification* entailed. Neither did any anthropologists who followed Hess engage in the task. One could then begin by associating the function of the signifier “mafia” with the reflections on *mana*-terms by Lévi-Strauss ([1950] 1987: 62–63), who noted how some systems of signification are *sustained* by semantic *vacuums*, allegedly *empty signifiers*, or notions capable of incorporating all kinds of meanings and laying the groundwork for the invisible substance of power. Peter Geschiere has a similar concern when he approaches such a fleeting subject as witchcraft: “a panacea concept of considerable power, because of its kaleidoscopic character; and anthropological writings seem to reinforce this tendency rather to defuse it” (Geschiere 2010: 234). The words *mafia* and *witchcraft* share the same semantic ambiguity: this is where lies their performative power of terrifying by threatening social, political or religious life with unpredictable harm. But we must be careful not to confuse the analysis with the dispositions of the topic. Herzfeld warned me about more than one “muddle in the model” of *mafiacraft*. Further clarification with regard to this paradigm for rethinking the mafia is thus needed.

Let's start from the beginning. When explaining the genesis of witchcraft as a term which, “used loosely in Tudor and Stewart England [...], applied to virtually every kind of magical activity or ritual operation that worked by occult methods”, Keith Thomas pointed out that, at a certain moment in history, the “bewildering variety of semantic usage” of this term was subsumed by a religious category with legal consequences: “a heretical belief –

Devil Worship” (1970: 48-49)¹. In 1982, the Rognoni–La Torre Law, a watershed moment for *mafiacraft*, introduced the “mafia” into the penal code ending the work of interpretation of this word, which served Mafia’s own cunning purposes. Witchcraft can, however, be approached as a discursive formation, to scrutinize how the deployment of the term had political effects. This was the approach followed by historian Carlo Ginzburg when casting light on phenomena such as “witch trials,” comparing the repression of terrorism to a “witch hunt” (Ginzburg [1991] 2002). The same was true for the fight against the mafia (Sciascia 1989). At this level, witchcraft *acted as a historical metaparadigm* illustrating how social facts founded on mere conjectures have been stabilized by use of legal categories and repressive measures—as was the case for popular practices associated with witchcraft and witches, before being criminalized by the Inquisition (Ginzburg [1966] 1983; [1976] 1980). In a similar fashion, *mafiacraft* aims to become an *anthropological metaparadigm* describing how a range of *real and widespread* illegal practices (i.e., aggression, extortion, smuggling, money laundering, fraud, murders), concealed by the government’s complicity, have been tolerated or *considered as more or less nonexistent* by certain groups, and have been publicly “grouped” or “counted-as-one” by others, to borrow a famous concept from Alain Badiou ([1988] 2005: 4). This social “counting-as-one” has given *full consistency* to a new signifier where the “mafia” is a special kind of “criminal association” and a “mafioso” is a member of a “mafia-type association.”

Michael Herzfeld is quite right to note that the English translation of the word mafia doesn’t correspond to the Italian one. But this issue needs to be addressed in broader anthropological terms. By translating *mafia* into another term such as “criminal organization,” we would incur the same problem affecting early anthropologists who attempted to translate *mana* into “energy,” merely replacing on the paradigmatic plane (structurally speaking) a floating signifier with an equally mysterious “thing”: Our Thing, Cosa Nostra. After Peter Geschiere criticized witchcraft as a reductive term for a set of African notions that could be better represented by more neutral concepts as “occult force” or “special energy”, he came to recognize that the widespread use of this wording by Africans makes it impossible to avoid in anthropological analyses (Geschiere 1998: 1253). Let us recall also Wittgenstein questioning another floating signifier such as “imagination”: “One ought to ask,” he writes, “not what images are or what goes on when one imagines something, but how the word ‘imagination’ is used” ([1953] 2009: 270). As invisible wrongdoing, “witchcraft” and “mafia” occupied the same ontological space of those “things” whose very existence is put into doubt, sources of misunderstandings between outsiders and insiders who “may have other things on their minds” (Geschiere 2010: 235) when referring to these words. That’s why the first step of *mafiacraft* was an extensive ethnographic survey on the multifarious ways in which the word mafia was *translated, interpreted and used* in different contexts. Being more interested in this process of translation than in the “real” meaning of the word mafia, I put on hold the issue of what the mafia *was* to obtain a better understanding of how the word mafia *works*. This was the first task of *mafia-craft* as an alternative methodology for investigating the mafia phenomenon.

That’s why the criticism of *mafiacraft* as a new-old method for “reifying” the mafia sounds inconsistent to me, especially when compared with the criticism of “having denied *mafia* ontological status” coming just a few lines later on Herzfeld’s comment. This contradiction could be avoided by an acknowledgment that some topics –such as witchcraft or

¹ The book where this article appears, edited by Mary Douglas, was a successful interdisciplinary intellectual enterprise, gathering anthropologists as well as historians concerned by witchcraft. Almost thirty years after, Peter Geschiere profoundly regretted the lack of dialogue between historians and anthropologists in witchcraft studies (1998: 1254). *Mafiacraft*, an interdisciplinary research trajectory before coming back to anthropological concerns, was an attempt to address this need.

the mafia— require one to adopt a position of “epistemological pluralism”, which recognizes for some “things” the (“magical”) faculty of being *and* not being at the same time (Geschiere 2001; Jewsiewicki, 2001: 626). Possibly the confusion Herzfeld attributes to my work is a mere reflection of the epistemology of the mafia topic. Pace Herzfeld, *mafiacraft* is not just an “invention” of a term, but an epistemological stance. If he doesn’t see it, it is maybe because he is taking a *regard scholastic* (Geschiere 2010: 249) trying to “objectify” social facts that, like witchcraft or mafia, draw their strength from the ambiguity of their ontology.

I will take another example to clarify the ontological issue at stake, for Herzfeld (involuntary) misleading comments efficiently encourage the kind of misunderstandings that *mafiacraft* tries to avoid. When I studied the Virgin Mary (Puccio 2004; Puccio-Den 2009), it was not in order to decide whether the Virgin Mary *exists or not*. It was rather to interrogate how social actors make the Virgin Mary exist: by which devices, acts, gestures, things, and words; it was rather to understand in which ontology, or in which *regime of reality or truth*, the Virgin Mary *does exist*. Michael Herzfeld is not aware that he makes my point when he states that: “all facts are representations”, a statement that, elsewhere, supports his criticism of the dismantling of a category such as the “Mediterranean”. Using the same arguments that I used for the ‘mafia’, he recalls: “the effect that inasmuch as facts are constructions of realities, they have the same ontological status as other perceived realities” (Herzfeld 2005: 47). Designed as a material history of moral ideas, *mafiacraft* describes ethnographically how the antimafia, as a movement claiming the existence of the mafia, was a Copernican knowledge revolution made of concrete actions, operating procedures, tangible objects, legal devices, and work processes. *Mafiacraft* focuses on the ontological consequences of these activities, whether grassroots or institutional, not in order to state the existence or the nonexistence of the mafia, but in order to describe the ontologies in the minds of the social and political actors involved. In the next step, *mafiacraft* is a program for *ethnographing the silence* focused on the mechanisms of denying a reality rather than in answering the question of whether the mafia *exists*, based on the hypothesis that this work or *labor* of silence (to adopt the helpful term suggested by Santoro) defines the terms in which the mafia exists.

Another classification is in order regarding the complex relationship between talk and silence, rather blurred in Herzfeld’s comment, which depicts silence as a “dramatic, evanescent, and mysterious phenomenon”. As an anthropologist, I think the best way for not “otherizing” silence is to submit it to ethnography. I have previously underlined some epistemological similarities between witchcraft and *mafiacraft*; nonetheless these ethnographical devices deal with two different levels of reality, and thus require two specific methods². “Witchcraft” may be employed as an analytical concept, a paradigm shaped by ethnographic theory to scrutinize discourses (Favret-Saada [1977] 1980) or *speech acts* such as rumors (Bonhomme [2009] 2016) aimed to generate performative malicious effects. “To talk, in witchcraft, is never to inform,” writes Favret-Saada. “Informing an ethnographer, that is, someone who claims to have no intention of using the information, but naïvely wants to know for the sake of knowing, is literally unthinkable. Similarly, it is unthinkable that people can talk for the sake of talking” ([1977] 1980: 9–10). Favret-Saada goes on to argue that what Malinowski called “phatic communication”—allegedly purposeless speech acts and polite small talk—does not exist in the Bocage, the French countryside where she did her fieldwork. Rather, in the Bocage, “[w]hen interlocutors for whom witchcraft is involved talks about nothing (that is about anything except what really matters) *it is to emphasize the violence of*

² This will be also accomplished at my EHESS seminar (2019-2020) entitled: “Ethnographier le silence. Terrains, méthodes et perspectives de recherche” (Ethnographing the silence. Fieldworks, methods, and theoretical perspectives). Scientific manifestations such as the international and interdisciplinary congress *Faire Silence. Expériences, matérialités, pouvoirs* (EHESS, Marseille, 21-25 Mai 2019), have taken seriously this topic considering it as a new field of inquiry.

what is not being talked about” ([1977] 1980: 11, emphasis added). *Deadly words* thus contain the seed of a theory of performativity of *deadly silences* or, rather, one could argue, a reflection on the violence of *nondefinitional speech acts*. *Mafiacraft* aims to explore ethnographically how such speech acts of silence and *circumlocution* (which Mini’s answer to the judge epitomizes) have constituted the mafia reality.

Both Santoro and Walker have rightly stressed that *mafiacraft* follows the footsteps of the research perspectives opened by Keith Basso by describing and analyzing specific acts of silence in such situations where “*the status of focal participant is marked by ambiguity*” (Basso 1970: 226, author’s emphasis). *Mafiacraft* underlines the political implications of this ambiguity. This is where it feeds into a political anthropology of silence³, by aiming to inquire how *nondefinitional states constructed by a pragmatic use of silence* eventually built the *reality* of a phenomenon. This construct, “craft” or *labor* is precisely the work of omertà, the mafia’s own performative law of silence. Here two levels of reality have to be distinguished: while the social representation of the mafia is shaped by words and images, the mafia as such is shaped by silence. That antimafia wording processes make the mafia *exist*, paradoxically, at the same time as they dissolve the mafia’s power to exist through silence (through silent acts, silent threats, and silent obedience that substantiate its existence). Herzfeld points out that earlier scholars, such as Di Bella (2008), have acknowledged the work of silence as a type of speech act in Sicily. However, Di Bella’s work locates silence’s matrix in Sicilian “popular culture” or folklore. In my work, I refuse to categorize silence as a sort of “folk-act,” but illustrate how silence has become a *modality of political action*.

An important issue raised by Santoro is the linkage between *mafiacraft* and *statecraft*. I would approach this issue following Walker’s proposal to move the cursor from *Statecraft* to the “state effect”. Drawing on Mitchell’s seminal article (2006), I will summarize my response on this matter in two points: 1) *Mafiacraft* is an anthropological survey which applied itself to examining the political process through which the powerful distinction between the State and “the mafia” was produced, “taking seriously” the elusiveness of the boundary between these two entities, and analyzing their co-construction (Puccio-Den 2011). 2) *Mafiacraft* considers the efforts to demarcate this boundary as a “technique” of the modern state, alerting us to the role played by social scientists in reinforcing this distinction. The state’s contribution to this “craft-work” calls for a refined model of the state’s action. If witchcraft could be deployed by different state powers as a coercive apparatus to *invent* innocent victims and occult practices, and qualify them as witches and witchcraft, in our *mafiacraft* the state is constantly subject to an *ideological splitting*: some institutional representatives have decided to conceal a cluster of criminal activities through silence, while others have worked to expose these wrongdoings and build conceptual categories, concrete devices, and legal tools able to grasp them and bring them to justice. *Mafiacraft* illustrates this dual-track process: what mafia *does* with silence is inferred by what antimafia *undoes* with words. Speech acts and writing events pave the way to confronting the power of silence that could be studied through the entire spectrum of its acts: the unsaid, the tacit, the inchoate, the denied. I wonder if there is not some striking contradiction in the criticism of Herzfeld to *mafiacraft*, since even the title of his comment, “the reality of inchoateness”, strongly supports my argument: the inchoate being precisely one of the figures of silence as a speech act.

The real and urgent problem about the “mafia” was how to address the “reality of inchoateness” from a legal point of view; how to cope with the “semiotic force of specific acts

³ This is the title of my EHESS seminar (*Anthropologie de la mafia. Pour une anthropologie politique du silence*, 2018/2019 and 2019/2020). Following this path, many fieldworks are currently undertaken by students under my direction raising specific starting points of this research program. The heuristic value of *mafiacraft* depends also on their current and future research and fieldworks.

of silence » like intimidations or implicit instigations to kill. This was the work of “responsabilization”. Herzfeld suggests that I should further explain this term, and I will do it. But responding to the stimulating comment of Jane Schneider, will make my position clearer. As Schneider cogently highlights, one needs to enlarge the scope within which the mafia has to be understood by defining contexts and adding a geopolitical view, including the relationships between Sicily and the United States, and the broader forms that the antimafia movement took in this peripheral region of Italy before the mafia urbanization. This is a topic she is very familiar with through her fieldwork in the 1960s in a Sicilian village, while my research is focused in Palermo. What can I say about the case study she evokes, the Impastato’s tragic murder in 1978, is that despite the fact that the antimafia movement was “considerably broader” in the 1970s, a handful of people attended the funeral of the left-wing activist murdered by “the mafia”. As the coffin passed by, his brother Giovanni reminds⁴, the inhabitants of Cinisi, walled in their houses, closed their windows. Less than twenty-five years after, Giovanni Falcone's state funerals were attended by tens of thousands of people. The Palermitans opened their windows and the women displayed their white sheets to mark their mourning, a feminist silent sign of revolt. *Mafiacraft* attempts to explain such high-contrast scenes.

Much work has been done by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists which provides insights into the *social and political conditions* of the emergence, and current vitality, of the mafia: I obviously do not intend to diminish their substantial contributions to the debate about this form of criminal action. I am just worried about the epistemological implications of such ex-post descriptions of mafia events, which could provide a biased view of the inferential chain. In other words, the words used by Violaine Roussel trying to explain the transformation of magistrates' practices during the political-financial scandals that multiplied in France from the 1990s onwards, we should not succumb to the “retrospective illusion” (Roussel 2001: 283) of social and political conditions that could be themselves *conditioned* by other factors. *Mafiacraft* points out the radical transformation of categories of knowledge entailed by the advent of a new generation of lawyers, magistrates and investigators. As in the book by Giovanni Levi *Le pouvoir au village* (1989), *mafiacraft* is a new narrative where the focus is shifted to the agency and the creativity of some social actors (Geschiere 1998: 1271), like the judge Giovanni Falcone, whose description of the mafia phenomenon modified once and for all its ontological status (no one is allowed to affirm that the mafia *doesn't exist* in Italy nowadays).

Mafiacraft is not a criticism, but a reconsideration of current approaches of the mafia phenomenon which aspires to becoming an alternative program. As an anthropological program of research, it seizes the opportunity to take a different perspective on the mafia, which does not view it solely as a phenomenon linked to a specific historical and political context. Here I do not apologize to Herzfeld for not being as “modest” as Jacquemet: as a Sicilian woman, I know well that Mediterranean men have deemed modesty (the counterpart of “continence as a male ideal”) to be a required and appreciated quality in women to silence them. Possibly anthropologists are no exception. Santoro suggests I clarify my personal engagement in my fieldwork. I am “a woman with Sicilian roots,” but I grew up in the north of Italy as he did. Was I more shocked by the murders of the antimafia judges Falcone and Borsellino than other Italians? Possibly. When these tragic events happened, I was in the mountains of Friuli completing my first fieldwork on carnival. For a very long period, I

⁴ I interviewed Giovanni Impastato, the brother of the murdered antimafia activist Giuseppe Impastato, in 2006. A photograph taken by the photographer Franco Zecchin during the funeral procession captured this scene.

worked on other subjects, and the mafia was just one of them.⁵ This is another point I have in common with Santoro: neither of us is *just* a mafia specialist. That is why I can treat the mafia as any other anthropological object, just like the Virgin Mary. Not to disregard such a view from afar, a “*regard éloigné*” as we say in France, is part of *mafiacraft*’s program. Herzfeld will surely forgive me if I dare to summon Lévi-Strauss ([1983] 1985) into a discussion on a topic which he firmly regards as a feature of European or Mediterranean anthropology.

But I will provide some elements to show that this “claim” for overcoming geographical areas is not misplaced or unjustified, scientifically speaking, for the topic of the mafia’s “responsabilization”. Harry Walker’s comment is itself a powerful answer to Herzfeld’s question since it grounds this term in a wide range of legal and moral processes (Lacey 2016) that challenge our neoliberal models of description of the self. It is relevant that this very helpful displacement was entailed by the comment of an anthropologist such as Walker who does not specialize in European anthropology. Striking is that direct interventions by some African states as Cameroun in witchcraft affairs (Geschiere 1998) are coeval with the emergence of mafia trials in Italy. As witchcraft, the mafia is possibly one of the “ways in which people try to cope with the baffling modern changes” (Geschiere 2010: 247) produced by the birth of centralized nations. As witchcraft for African countries, the use of the term mafia was disqualified for “primitivizing” (Geschiere 2010: 235) Sicily, a region tangential to the modernization. There have been few attempts at linking mafia and globalization, as does Geschiere when interpreting witchcraft as a device for articulating the local and the global scale, the periphery and the center, traditions and the market (Geschiere 2010: 246). These innovative frameworks for interpreting the mafia phenomenon were elaborated more by judges such as Giovanni Falcone than by social scientists (Puccio 2001). *Mafiacraft* is grounded in this effort to withdraw the mafia from its archaizing and “local” gangue, showing how pervasively silence acts in the political strategies of modern states. Witchcraft is in the realm of religion what the mafia is in the realm of politics: a discursive reality (but not only) that emerged at the same time as the metanarrative called “modernity” for supporting modern forms of power through the efficacy of the secret (Geschiere 2000: 251). *Mafiacraft* has the ambition of opening the debate about the mafia to these issues of moral and political anthropology.

Now, it is time to show how the mafia topic should be opened to such themes as “responsibility”, a theme which has recently received renewed attention, also thanks to the work of Harry Walker. In regard to the difference between *witchcraft* and *mafiacraft*, I already noted that both concepts are employed to address what Douglas called “systems of accountability” (1980: 49–73). In a recent collection entitled *Competing responsibilities: The ethics and politics of contemporary life*, Susanna Trnka and Catherine Trundle (2017) have underlined how neoliberal rhetoric reifies the “responsible subject,” thus minimizing the myriad forms of individual and collective responsibility people may engage in their everyday lives. Questioning “responsibility” thus opens up new avenues that lay the groundwork for future work about the clash of normative systems in a neoliberal state.⁶ Even the anthropology of honor may be renewed by framing the issues related to this normative system in a wider interdisciplinary discussion, convening lawyers as well as anthropologists. This could stimulate a reflexive critique on the global scale about how compulsory worldwide norms

5. The connecting points of this intellectual path through apparently disparate topics (carnival, the Virgin Mary, the mafia, art objects, and dance performances), is discussed in the forthcoming book *Ethnographier le silence, ethnographier le nuit*.

6. The first step of this research program—one of the possible extensions of *Mafiacraft*—was a special issue of *L’Homme* about responsibility, which was the result of a series of collective, interdisciplinary, and internationally conducted research activities (Puccio-Den 2017a).

clash with local conceptions and practices of accountability,⁷ inserting the mafia, and the *omertà*, in a wider debate on legal pluralism. The issue at stake here is not etymological, as Herzfeld notes by reminding us that *omertà* derives from the term *omu* (man), thus deploying an antiquated anthropology of Mediterranean ideal types. *Omertà* is rather an ontological device defining the very borders of humanity. For the people affected by the (non)speech act of *omertà*, mafia's strategic use of silence upsets the very idea of humanity and human rights, the bases of democracy and the rule of law (Puccio-Den 2017b).

The issue at stake regarding “responsibilization” is quite distinct from the questions raised by Herzfeld about the effects of a neoliberal blaming for failure to achieve prosperity, yet closer to the local debates I have followed for years in Sicily and Italy: How does a democratic state, with a judiciary inspired by the liberal principle of strictly personal liability, deal with the problems linked to the judgment of a collective entity, the “mafia”? I have written extensively on the subject (cf. Puccio-Den 2017b). I should add here only that *responsibility*—if we “take seriously” this topic as Walker does, and the challenges it poses to the description of human action (Laidlaw 2014)—could be interpreted as a speech regime at the opposite end of the spectrum to silence. The former supposes a speech act whereby the “I” is the privileged point of view of the agent on his or her actions. Thus, let us assume that silence does not allow this kind of speech act, leaving the action in a state of indeterminacy about its author. That is crucial with regard to the collective entity or form of criminal action that is of interest to us: the mafia. Responsibility—as a new quality of action that the Italian state demanded from the “mafia” and the mafiosi when they were held accountable for their criminal acts—put into question *honor* as a collective good and *shared substance* (Cosa Nostra). What is at stake with “responsibilization,” is a profound alteration of the ontology of the “mafia” when the mafiosi were forced to respond individually for acts they had done collectively within the social, moral, and cognitive framework of Cosa Nostra, “our thing.” Studying ontological changes is not a way of “denying ontological reality to mafia”, as asserted by Herzfeld, but rather a way of considering ontologies as not fixed once and for all. It is a method of introducing temporalities in structures.

The mafia challenged the mental frameworks, the legal categories and devices, the principles of our democracy, and the very idea of humanity. Following Santoro, it also challenges the categories of knowledge shaped by the state. Many magistrates, politicians, lawyers, activists, and ordinary citizens have paid a high and real price for changing perceptions of and mindsets regarding the mafia. Debates on the mafia, when genuine, are always highly controversial. I am grateful to everyone committed to this thorough and insightful discussion on *mafia*, hoping sincerely that the strength of anthropology as a mode of critical thinking will rise to this challenge.

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7. This is the topic we are exploring in our EHESS laboratory's seminar at the LAIOS-IIAC (a laboratory specialized in Politics), entitled “Globalization: norms and tensions,” a seminar I have been coordinating in 2017/2018 and in 2018/2019 along with its director, Irène Bellier.

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