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COLLOQUIUM

Mafiacraft: How to do things with silence

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The Mafia? What is the Mafia? Something you eat?
Something you drink? I don't know the Mafia, I have
never seen it.

– Mommo Piromalli, boss of the 'Ndrangheta¹

The Mafia? Is it a brand of cheese? Tell me what it is,
because I have no idea!

– Gherlando Alberti, member of Cosa Nostra²

Mafiacraft is a material history of moral ideas.³ How to *incarnate* the invisible, how to provide a body for *something* that you can neither see nor touch, that you can neither “drink nor eat,” that is only a label covering a vacuum: “Mafia”? Mafiacraft tries to answer this question, the same question raised by the provocative responses of the two “Mafiosi”—for provocation is always meaningful in the Mafia world. Christians have created rituals to drink and eat the Body of Christ, and mysteries to solve the presence of God in His absence.⁴

1. Quoted by Nicaso 2010: 12.

2. Quoted by Padovani 1987: 9.

3. This article condenses the methodological principles and the theoretical perspectives of a paradigm for rethinking the Mafia that will be deployed and grounded in precise ethnography in my forthcoming book *Mafiacraft* (2019b).

4. Transposed to the Virgin Mary, this question encompassed transcendent reality and ways to fix the meaning and status of silent objects such as holy statues in Catholic contexts. The issue of Incarnation is explored in chapter 6 of a book (Puccio-Den 2009) that also examines the ways in which the anti-Mafia movement identified the “Mafia” as a “plague,” a form of religious “alterity,” and a heteronomy.

Following the conceptions of personhood prevailing in Western Christian societies,⁵ my investigation has considered the process of attributing a name, a shape, a structure, a physiognomy, in a word, a *body* capable of *incarnating* the “Mafia.” This process unfolds through practices of disavowal, obliqueness, and outright silence by members of both the “Mafia” and the judicial establishment that tried to prosecute them; but it relates also to moral values of respect, honor, and obedience that needed to be brought into play in order for people like the “repentant” Tommaso Buscetta to begin collaborating with Judge Giovanni Falcone. It unfolds through practices of inscription of the fate of Cosa Nostra’s victims on papers or stones; but it relates also to the impossible memorialization of “Mafia victims” by a state involved in “Mafia terrorism.”⁶ It unfolds through laws and legal practices, but it relates also to grassroots writing and denouncing acts opposing Mafia un-words and silent acts.

Mafiacraft is a new paradigm for exploring the forms and modalities of Mafia actions by identifying in the silence their occult and powerful matrix. Anthropologists have showed the lethal power of words in different contexts marked by rumors of sorcery—from Africa to Europe—, words that, as we well know, could cause illness or death. Mafiacraft analyzes the deadly force of Mafia silence by taking as a starting point the acts and words (Austin 1962)—being they are pronounced or written (Fraenkel 2002)—performed by the anti-Mafia judiciary and the anti-Mafia movement in order to “break the silence” and hence “heal the wounds” of Italian society (Puccio-Den 2009). The Sicilian politician and lawyer Pio La Torre understood that the state accusatory system against the Mafia needed to be addressed to the silence when he specified the three “Mafia methods” to be sanctioned by the law: *omertà* (acts of silence), intimidation (silent threats), and subjection (silent obedience)⁷. Mafiacraft draws on this kind of “local knowledge” for proposing a methodological and epistemological shift: learning from how lawyers, judges, activists, or simple citizens have dealt with Mafia silence what silence is made of, laying the foundations for a new branch of our discipline: the “anthropology of silence.”⁸ The aim of this work drawing a parallel with witchcraft is not to demonstrate that Mafiosi, as witches, *do not exist* and that they are just the last (or the first) link of the inferential chain of (political) evil. It is rather to show under what conditions Mafia silence *does exist*. I won’t call Mafia silence from the outset *omertà* because I consider that the latter is a cultural category, and that my aim is indeed to reflect on how far the state shapes cultural codes.

Most studies of the Mafia have tried to answer the question: What is the Mafia?⁹ In so doing, though, researchers in the social sciences have become an integral part of what they set

5. This way of conceiving the Mafia phenomenon is rooted in previous works on the social construction of gender through rites of passage that shape the feminine as something to be defined, bounded, and settled (Puccio 2002).

6. As has been demonstrated by the decision of the “Borsellino Quatuor” trial (2017), one of the “Bargaining Trials” (*Processo della trattativa*) judging the strategy of terrorism used by the Mafia-type association Cosa Nostra at the beginning of the 1990s in order to blackmail the Italian state, a strategy finding a sponsor in some politicians of the Italian Second Republic.

⁷ Article 416 bis of the Italian penal code, Rognoni–La Torre Law, 1982.

⁸ Since 2018, I have been teaching “Anthropology of the Mafia: for a Political Anthropology of Silence” at EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris).

⁹ I shall limit myself, therefore, to citing some of the classical studies, referring the reader in particular to an important book summarizing the bibliography on the Mafia (U. Santino 1995). More

out to study and define. The methodological assumption informing my work is that the Mafia is not a social fact fixed once and for all, ready to be studied or “revealed,” but a cognitive event structured by silence. This is suggested by the name the Mafiosi chose to give to this “thing” without naming it as such: Cosa Nostra, “our thing.” We cannot expect an answer from them about what they consider as “their own business.” But we may seek to grasp the multifarious ways in which the judiciary, civil society, and social scientists have dealt with *what is unsaid*, what is avoided in silence, and what is shrouded in secrecy, so as to gain a better understanding of *silence as a form of action and a speech regime*. Let’s put aside the *omertà* as a(n) (im)moral idea, and let’s focus on the moral world of the Mafiosi—a world shaped by silence in all its shades deploying the complete spectrum of what is left unsaid or kept in silence—in order to gain more insight into the *social and political conditions of existence* of this latter: it seems to me that this is the very anthropological issue contained within the question: “Does the Mafia exist?”. This is the shift proposed and the challenge posed by Mafiacraft.

Most of those scholars who have studied the Mafia consider they have to deal with *omertà* as a “cultural code” belonging to Sicily (Di Bella 2011). Thus, despite themselves, they participate in the construction of a cultural category masking the use of silence as a political tool. Unveiling this latter is the epistemological reversal proposed by Mafiacraft, moving from the cultural study of the Mafia to a political anthropology of silence. Following the Weberian scheme, the Mafia has been interpreted as a local mode of challenging the state’s monopoly of violence, regarding *omertà* in the same framework as a form of cultural resistance to a “recently” centralized state. Mafiacraft challenges this paradigm and proposes to reflect on the violence of state monopoly of words and silences through the multiple graphic and sound forms of fight used by the anti-Mafia movement and justice system.

Since the unification of Italy in 1871, certain phenomena, such as impunity for crimes committed under the protection of political power or by organized crime with the capacity to exert territorial control and sustain military-style operations, have been classified under the common denominator of the “Mafia.” Social scientists, as well as public officers, investigators, and prosecutors, endeavored to develop theories about “what the Mafia is.” My aim here is not to produce some exhaustive analysis of the publications dealing specifically with this issue. This output is enormous. However, the profusion of ideas compulsively addressing the Mafia is part of my research object: an uncertain phenomenon whose very existence was speculative for more than a century. In 1982, the “Mafia” was finally introduced into the Italian penal code. The law chose from among a range of conflicting interpretations concerning the question “What is the Mafia?”¹⁰ I use the term “Mafiacraft”¹¹ for a new form of inquiry that, instead of being committed to obtaining an answer, focuses on

than ten years after, Marco Santoro (2007) pointed to the overabundance of the works choosing the Mafia as a research topic, counting about 450 books published in fifteen years. More recently, another book edited by the same researcher (Santoro 2015) provides an overview of contemporary studies of this issue.

10. The Rognoni–La Torre Law, stipulating that the Mafia is a criminal category, and a special kind of criminal association, was promulgated in 1982 after the murder of General Dalla Chiesa.

11. I owe this neologism to the editor and anthropologist Giovanni da Col, with whom I conceived the project of this article, and discussed many times the underlying paradigm. I express here my deep gratitude to him.

this questioning process, which includes the social sciences and epistemologies, the law and legal proceedings, as well as grassroots explanations. This article considers the current parallels that have been made in anthropology, common sense, and the media between allocation of responsibility to the Mafia and accusations of witchcraft. At each stage, I show the similarity as well as the contrasts between Mafiacraft and witchcraft.

I wish to propose a distinction between special kinds of social and criminal relationships defined by the state as Mafia-type organizations—Cosa Nostra, the ‘Ndragheta, the Camorra, the Sacra Corona Unita, to confine ourselves to Italy—and the Mafia as a broader phenomenon that concerns epistemology as much as the social sciences. The manner in which the Mafia issue was raised in Italy entailed not only innovative forms of mobilization, substantial modifications in the structure of the justice system, and fundamental changes at a political level, but also new forms of knowledge. Changing epistemological frameworks and paradigm shifts to approaching and conceptualizing the phenomenon of the Mafia led to the transformation of judicial categories, moral values, current practices, and codes of behaviors. The relationship between legal and illegal, the borders between licit and illicit, the conditions governing social and political life, and the very essence of humanity were challenged by the question “What is the Mafia?” Instead of taking a dominant posture as a social scientist, I have acknowledged the “critical competencies” and skills of actors (Boltanski [1990] 2012), assigning to myself the task of describing their intellectual, cognitive, and moral universe. Mafiacraft is the first step of this research program, which meets, in at least some respects, the principles of “activist research” as it was delineated by Charles Hale (2001).

This shift also responds to the moral discomfort and practical difficulty of giving a description “from the inside” of a secretive criminal world. The criminalization of the “Mafia” profoundly altered the ontological conditions of this research topic, and not without implications for the practices of anthropology. Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider (1976) studied a Sicilian village in the 1970s, but didn’t focus on the topic of the Mafia, aware that it was very difficult to conceptualize the Mafia without having access to the fieldwork. Anthropologists conducting fieldwork during the 1970s, like Anton Blok (1975), did not fully take the measure of this situation, challenging him to produce an ethnography of “something” that *did not exist*. Works by folklorists like Giuseppe Pitré (1889), followed by anthropologists such as Maria Pia Di Bella (2011), convinced of the local anchorage of the Mafia, drew on the “traditional culture” of Sicily (proverbs, beliefs, and practices). Sociologists neglected to ground their theories in empirical data, difficult to obtain by speaking with the “Mafiosi,” and, more importantly, they failed to subject the categories of “Mafia” and “Mafioso” they used to critical scrutiny (Arlacchi 1983). Historians bypassed this limitation by accessing archives, but without questioning the historical conditions of the categorization process generated by the introduction of the words “Mafia” and “Mafioso” into the Italian political language (Lupo 1993, 2007). More recently, some anthropologists have made formal and informal interviews, and conducted participant observation, in social contexts and situations marked by the “presence” of the Mafia (Rakopoulos 2018). Yet this presence is highly speculative, as fleeting and elusive as the presence of witches in other contexts (Puccio-Den 2019a). Faced with this situation, another line of anthropological inquiry is available that has received less attention: the ethnographer can explore the “Mafia”

by indexing the conjectures and speculations around this mysterious entity, describing the acts (social, judicial, or graphic) made in the attempt to break the silence in and around this secret phenomenon, and solving the multiple problems linked to its indeterminacy (impunity, invisibility, irrepresentability).

It may be tempting to establish a link between inquisitorial procedures of witch hunting and anti-Mafia inquiries, both procedures that create categories (witches and Mafiosi) used to criminalize social behaviors. But this representation, yielding to the romantic view of the Mafia as a cultural fact, which the anthropologist interprets as a critique of the state, prevents us from engaging in critical thinking and political awareness. This criticism misses its target because the Mafia is not an expression of the local culture repressed by the state, but rather a political configuration in which the state is actively involved and strives to protect. This action of “invisibilization” is more akin to the methods used by the state to conceal evidence of bodies that “disappeared” under dictatorial regimes in Central and Latin America than to procedures invented to create the evidence needed to legally prosecute “popular culture.” Seen in this light, Maficraft is an inverted paradigm of witchcraft.

My inquiry began in the mid-1990s when I conducted participant observation while personally engaged in the political struggle against the Mafia. First I undertook ethnographic fieldwork on the practices of anti-Mafia activists; subsequently I widened the perimeter of my research to include the practices of anti-Mafia judges dealing with the same question of how to expose a silent and hidden phenomenon. From a certain moment in Italy’s contemporary history, some descriptions of the Mafia phenomenon placed it within the legal framework of judicial responsibility. Grassroots participation in this process of responsabilization was essential and needs to be taken into consideration, as Michael Herzfeld (1997) did for Greece and other countries in his study of social poetics in the nation-state. For this reason, I have decided to place investigative tools and devices, and the social actions deployed by the judiciary and civil society, on the same level, as two joint endeavors, not only to demonstrate that the “Mafia exists,” but also to get a sense of “what it is made of.” Both the practices of the anti-Mafia movement and judicial Mafia trials have been interpreted as social and cognitive attempts to grasp a troubling phenomenon that gains some of its power of lethal fascination from its capacity to evade every form of definition. I use the term “Maficraft,” therefore, as a program for studying a range of activities and practices that reveal the relationship between the shaping of knowledge models, the transformation of moral and judicial categories, the modification of political structures, and the renewal of forms of social action. A top-down and bottom-up logic both exist in the anti-Mafia project, and Maficraft is a way of connecting them within one multifaceted process of allocating responsibility. From this point of view, Maficraft focuses on the systems of allocation of responsibility in a social order, as Evans-Pritchard—as shown by the study of Mary Douglas (1980)—did for witchcraft among the Azande and the Nuer.

How to provide this volatile and mysterious “thing” some call the Mafia with a “body of evidence” fit to bear the burden of responsibility? Finding an answer required paying attention to the arguments developed by anti-Mafia prosecutors and to the models they shaped, but also to the various tools that social actors coming from many professional and cultural backgrounds have used to produce evidence of the Mafia. The line of inquiry pursued in this article traces for the first time the links between these activities and the allocation of

Mafia liability. I began by stressing the distinction between these two areas, studied during different phases of my research. Instead of keeping these two perspectives separate, though, here I shall emphasize the considerable overlap between these two kinds of processes for allocating social and legal responsibility. The definition of the Mafia formulated by prosecutors and lawyers eventually prevailed, but the capacity of other social actors—including Mafiosi—to produce their own conceptions, traces, and evidence, their skill in shaping and managing alternative meanings and frameworks of responsibility, should not be ignored. Maficraft follows this creative process in all its stages, including its stopping points, its steps backwards and forwards, and its transfers.

Statements, claims, ideas, and paradigms do not just float in the air; they become incarnate in practices, bodies, and objects. In 1992, when Judges Falcone and Borsellino were murdered after their success in legally affirming the “Buscetta theorem” (an innovative framework of responsibilities introduced to prosecute “Mafia crimes”), tens of thousands of people demonstrated in the streets carrying banners and flags bearing the phrase: “Your ideas will walk on our legs.” Their bodies in movement substantiated a call for justice. Civil society became a relay and a sounding board for the judiciary when it came to assigning Mafia liability, relying on many and various “writing events” (Fraenkel 2002) or photographs, on one hand, and criminal justice reports and sentences or legislation, on the other.¹² When the judges shed light on the Mafia system and when a large protest movement arose against the Mafia, Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider (2003) took advantage of this opportunity to study the judiciary and the citizens’ social movement to reverse the Mafia’s economic, political, and cultural power. Maficraft is a theoretical enterprise grounded in a huge array of ethnographical material showing how moral stances and political emotions are embodied in things and objects, without which they could not *exist*. In this sense, the issue of the Mafia’s existence itself contains and generates the issue of the social existence of everything and anything that cannot be directly and empirically experienced (friendship, love, God) save through traces of evidence.

For me, Maficraft has been an anthropological life project, a body of work on the Mafia and anti-Mafia that has taken shape over a lengthy period of time, sewn together to create a unique tapestry in which the diverse elements enrich and support each other, arranged into a new kind of creative thinking. In so doing, I follow the model established by Falcone’s inquiry in Sicily: for Falcone, the breakthrough came not from conducting new investigations but from allowing all pieces of the jigsaw to fall into place. Under the rubric of Maficraft, I return to the research I have carried out over the last twenty years, including both ethnographical studies and epistemological reflections. My aim is to understand silence as a special form of agency or *regime of action*. It cannot *exist* from either an ontological or a social point of view without leaving *traces*. Thus Maficraft is a way of pursuing an ethnography in and around the silence, improving the methodological skills needed to answer theoretical and ethical questions in wider anthropology. Since silence has become an object of study—How does it work? What does it do to social life?—Maficraft can become a framework for understanding other objects of study across a wide range of social facts

12. The focus on the material supports of statements is grounded in the notion of “writing acts” derived from Austin’s speech act theory (1962). See also Fraenkel 2007.

impregnated by silence. What methods might anthropologists use to investigate silence and understand the denied, the unspeakable, and the unspoken, the tacit and the inchoate? What is silence's scope and force? How does it resist, fight, or capitulate to the strength of words or to the force of law?

Finally, in keeping with the overall theme of this article, I would like to underline the heuristic methods that Mafiacraft provides for interrogating the silence, by addressing the range of problems connected with doing ethnographic research in situations where words are of no use in understanding what is at stake. In such situations, the ethnographer can be a full participant as well as an observer, using reflexivity as a tool to grasp what they experience through silence. In a hall of mirrors, the contradictions and conundrums experienced during fieldwork, if and when appropriately integrated into the analysis, provide openings onto much broader theoretical issues. Responses elaborated reflexively to the question "What is the Mafia?" may also be useful in highlighting other contexts of actions whose meaning is not fixed once and for all, or where the relationship between words and things is not indexical. Rooted in a questioning of ritual action and theatrical performances (Puccio 2002; Puccio-Den 2009), nourished by other parallel and ongoing works on dance and art as forms of social action that blur indexicality (Puccio-Den 2017d), the "Mafia" is not an altogether different phenomenon because of its criminal status—which is merely a situational and historical effect of its recent classification in the Italian penal code. The Mafia is probably not a brand of cheese, but the Mafiosi are correct in suggesting us that we reflect on our ways of labeling reality.

Fighting the silence

When "our thing" became a "bad thing"

As mentioned earlier, one methodological difficulty in undertaking research on the "Mafia" is the absence of any commonly agreed definition of what the Mafia actually is. This raises issues when it comes to defining the focus of study, demarcating a specific fieldwork site, and adopting a suitable methodology. Confronted with a plurality of interpretations, ethnographers may choose one as more credible than the others, or try to solve this conflict by acknowledging that it is part of the issue they wish to address: an elusive and fleeting phenomenon marked by *ontological uncertainty*. A starting point for an enhanced understanding of the Mafia phenomenon was, for me, to compile an inventory of situational definitions and map their relevance in social space, allowing me to see how they were indexed to specific social, political, juridical, or scientific positions. Each trend may well be partially attributed to particular historical and political conditions affecting the shaping of anti-Mafia knowledge. These circumstances constitute an object of research in themselves. Special emphasis is placed not only on the contextualization of statements about the Mafia, but also on the conditions of intelligibility of the word "Mafia" itself: What makes a verbal statement audible, understandable, acceptable, plausible, credible, or worthwhile?

Watersheds ought to be a cause for reflection. During an initial phase of my inquiry, then, while I was shelving the issue of what the Mafia is from an essentialist viewpoint, I

explored the ways in which social perceptions of the Mafia have shifted over time, first in Sicily, then in mainland Italy. From the beginning of the 1980s, the Mafia, considered as a Sicilian way of being, a cultural trait, or a set of values (even a positive one, for some people), was progressively identified as a form of social, political, and even religious evil. But the term “perception” should not mislead. My concern was not to grasp the “social representations” of the Mafia, but to launch an ethnographic survey into the different materials, devices, and tools used by diverse categories of social actors (from activists to artists, citizens to prosecutors, writers to photographers) in support of their claims.

Of course, there were spheres of competencies and areas of expertise that had to be investigated separately. But there were also interconnections that needed to be illuminated so as to discover the cognitive frame underpinning judicial inquiries, social mobilizations, and artistic performances: What was the relationship between the new theoretical models for explaining the Mafia elaborated by the anti-Mafia judges, which exposed its ramifications in and outside Sicily, and the new forms of anti-Mafia activism building social and political links across Italy? Was there a connection between the criminalization of the Mafia as a social pathology and more fictional modes of communications that drew on the historical and mythical image of the “plague” in order to depict the Mafia as the symbol of political decay (Puccio-Den 2009)? What was the connection between the emergence of a new anti-Mafia iconography that placed the struggle against the Mafia within a religious frame; the blooming of devotional practices surrounding assassinated anti-Mafia magistrates; and the birth of a new literary genre—the Mafioso biography—based on the “confessions” of repentant Mafia informers?

Texts, images, photographs, letters, theater and festive performances, books, police reports, and judicial acts all seemed to speak the same language, pointing to the responsibility of the Mafia, its damaging nature, its dark side (Puccio-Den 2008b). Through these practices, anti-Mafia activists not only substantiated the Mafia’s “existence,” they also gave meaning to its existence: Cosa Nostra, “our thing,” was no more “our” thing; it was a social and political evil, and, moreover, an absolute and transcendent evil. But all these *processes of responsabilization*, even if and when connected, should not be confused as phenomena situated at the same level. They did *exist* but—as the “Mafia”—they operated at different levels of reality or in different spaces tiered between fiction and reality. This challenge implied understanding not only the power of symbols, but also the *process of symbolization* per se: how symbols work, what they can do and what they cannot. This issue would later contribute substantially to the recognition of the Mafia as an ideology, using religious symbols in order to create legitimacy (Puccio-Den 2017b). But at this stage, symbolization was a way to comprehend how people speak—and how they find new languages to speak—about traumatic events. This question led to further ethnographic fieldwork on the role played by photography in the construction of a visual order of Mafia injuries, on the shaping of the anti-Mafia movement as a “witness community” to what exactly the Mafia was, and on how difficult it is to stabilize the meaning of the word “Mafia” by institutionalizing an anti-Mafia memory.

Photographing the Mafia, or how to photograph something that does not exist?

Until the beginning of the 1980s, the existence of the Mafia was uncertain. Many legal proceedings had been launched, but the courts systematically dismissed the cases simply because the Mafia did not “exist” in the Italian criminal code. Another way to approach this issue was to study anti-Mafia photography as a medium through which the existence of the Mafia could be proved. This activity, linked to dissident journalism (against the falsification of reality made by most of the journalists of this period), emerged as a concept of anti-Mafia action, consciously developed and assumed as a political act. Taking photographs was a weapon because the Mafia derived its power from its capacity to conceal, its ability to avoid being captured by a single image: its strength lay in its ambiguity. To become involved in the fight meant casting aside the commonplace idea that the Mafia was merely a cultural code, showing by all means possible that it was a criminal phenomenon with a negative impact on society from various points of view, entailing corruption, degradation, poverty, violence, and underdevelopment. This did not just imply taking a clear stance: it also meant obliging people to take responsibility, placing them face-to-face with a problem they could no longer pretend to ignore. Exploiting the power of images, creating the conditions for this “face-to-face” encounter, were the main task of anti-Mafia photography.

However, anti-Mafia photography was not limited to passively reporting reality. It also constructed a framework to see the world differently, composing alternative kinds of images. Its modus operandi involved suspending washing lines in the squares of Sicilian towns and villages and hanging the photographs from them with clothes pegs. “Mafia” was both the title of the performance and the common caption to all these images. These photographic performances were a provocation, countering the cultural tendency to “turn a blind eye,” the phenomenological condition necessary to maintain the silence or *omertà*: if you did not see anything, you could not speak about it. But when the reality of the Mafia is exposed right before your eyes, placed in front of you, by a visual device bringing the public face-to-face with images, you have to say something. Then the Mafia leaves the state of uncertainty in which it was shrouded and acquires a concrete meaning, becoming not just visible, but also intelligible.

Photographing the Mafia was not only a political and civic action: it was also a cognitive act that established innovative categories of thinking and conveyed new forms of seeing the social world. This operation began by drawing the Mafia into the visible realm and thus removing its invisibility. But much more was involved. Insofar as this “montage”¹³ integrated the Mafia into a narrative, it suggested a way to read images and induced what should be seen. As a pedagogical tool, it not only had to show that the Mafia existed “for real,” it also had to tell what it “really” was. The duty to report is connected to the right to know and, prior to this, to knowing how to see, read, and interpret the multiple images of murders, attacks, poverty, and corruption lining Sicilian everyday life.

The attack on several representatives of the state represented by these photographic images showed that Sicily and Italy were, in fact, at war and that the Mafia threat was

13. Georges Didi-Huberman ([2009] 2018) considers “montage” an art of war: a method of knowledge and formal procedure that acknowledges the disorder of the world, trying to compose a new order of things.

increasingly similar to terrorism. Photos showing the disaster scenes after various Mafia attacks could be seen as evidence of its terrorist nature. When the most representative and closely protected of the anti-Mafia judges, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, were murdered, the idea of combating Mafia crime by any means imaginable, including photography, no longer made any sense. In 1992, the anti-Mafia photographers Franco Zecchin and Letizia Battaglia stopped photographing the Mafia. “There was nothing more to photograph,” Battaglia said.¹⁴ “There was nothing more to see, do or fight”. As Mafia violence was incommensurable, it was now (once again) unrepresentable.

Bearing witness

Immediately after the “Capaci massacre” on May 23, 1992, when Judge Giovanni Falcone was assassinated along with his wife Francesca Morvillo and three of their bodyguards, the magnolia tree in front of the assassinated judge’s apartment became a shrine. During the 1990s, when my fieldwork on the anti-Mafia movement began, the “Falcone Tree” had become a place of devotion. Citizens of Palermo were joined by people who would make their “pilgrimage,” as they said, arriving from all over Italy. Letters, writings, drawings, photos, as well as other objects typical of these “spontaneous shrines”¹⁵ (candles, flags, sweets, teddies . . .), were tied to the trunk of the magnolia tree, or laid on the lawn. For several years, I collected and interrogated these objects as privileged testimonies of anti-Mafia practices of mobilization.

On a global scale, the “Falcone Tree” could be compared with other memorial sites and graves, places of nonconfessional pilgrimages that demanded a reappraisal of this term and its boundaries, located between the secular and the religious (Margry 2008). But this was not the only appropriate scale. Spain after the Franco dictatorship, still dealing with the traumatic memory of the civil war, offered another case study and fieldwork site in which a tree—an oak this time—could be used as a metaphor as well as a point of connection structuring a fractured and wrenched society. In Italy, another country of Christian Europe, left-wing groups mobilized religious language, iconography, and symbols (Puccio-Den 2009). On a local scale, at the Monte Pellegrino, a mountain overlooking the city, other similar artifacts were placed on the altar of Saint Rosalia, the Holy Patron of Palermo, during the pilgrimage on the anniversary of her death. What kinds of transfers occurred between the transformation in the worship of Saint Rosalia, who became an anti-Mafia heroine during the same period, and the popular veneration of murdered anti-Mafia judges? And what was the relationship between these grassroots forms of piety and the canonical process of beatification initiated for some “martyrs of the Mafia”?

By associating the memory of Giovanni Falcone with the tree symbol, the anti-Mafia activists located the judge within the genealogy initiated by the Passion of Christ and used by saints, founders of monastic orders, and martyrs (Donadieu-Rigaut 2005: 205). In the etymological sense of the Greek, a martyr is a witness (of God). Bearing witness means affirming the value of something through one’s actions and words. The cult surrounding

14. Quote from an interview I conducted with Letizia Battaglia in 2008.

15. On these sites of death and tragedy, see J. Santino 2006.

Judge Falcone constituted a fieldwork site for studying the grassroots production of *traces* of the “Mafia’s existence.” Writings and drawings left by “pilgrims” visiting the “Falcone Tree” testified to an unprecedented situation in Sicily: the urgency to *bear witness*, at the same time as megatrials and legal proceedings were held against the Mafia in both Sicily and mainland Italy. This was the literal sense of the phrase “Your ideas will walk on our legs” plastering the banners and flags unfurled during anti-Mafia demonstrations. Pilgrims were “witnesses” not only in the Christian meaning of the word, but also in a legal sense. By moving and mobilizing themselves, by *being there*, in the place where Judge Falcone, and Judge Borsellino two months after him,¹⁶ had been murdered, by leaving their written testimonies, they were demonstrating their support for the cause. We must not forget that Falcone and Borsellino were both assassinated after the Court of Cassation, judging the 1992 Maxi Trial, had validated the “Buscetta theorem” recognizing the primary responsibility of Cosa Nostra and its leadership in several hundred murders perpetrated in Sicily since the Second World War. Somewhat paradoxically, the spectacular Mafia attacks against these two judges had provided dramatic evidence of the Mafia’s existence.

The “martyr judge”—a figure paradigmatic of the complex ties that the law maintains with religion—makes pilgrimage the emblematic experience of sacrifice that must be undergone by everybody in order to affirm the true value of a statement. By venerating anti-Mafia judges, the pilgrims actually sanctify their words and theorems. Each pilgrim, as a witness of martyrdom, is caught in an evidential process in which writings hold a central position. This is why I have attached such importance to tiny pieces of paper stuck on the “Falcone Tree”: they testify to a cause and form the framework of a community—the anti-Mafia community—which is perhaps the most enduring fruit of this magnolia and its transient writings.

Fleeting words, fleeting worlds

I have defined the Mafia as an *ontology* marked by uncertainty, particularly a semantic uncertainty about *what it is*. Written materials laid at the “Falcone Tree” offered a range of possibilities for answering this question, discovering the entire spectrum of claims and complaints against the Mafia. No doubt these short and ephemeral texts wrinkled by the wind and washed out by the rain were still supports for mobilization, showing the transformation of Mafia knowledge and perceptions, and structuring the creation of broader communities. But did they possess the “force of law” needed to ascertain the Mafia’s responsibility? Several years after the “Capaci massacre,” while continuing my fieldwork on the anti-Mafia movement, I found letters and drawings still covering the “Falcone Tree,” wedged in every nook and cranny, right to the top of the trunk. How could the persistence of these writing practices be explained? How to understand the meaning of offerings initially inspired by the emotion of the Mafia’s attack now that remembrance of the assassinated judge, organized and shaped by the Giovanni and Francesca Falcone Foundation, had taken on more

16. Borsellino was killed by a Mafia car bomb in Palermo fifty-seven days after Giovanni Falcone was assassinated in Capaci. The bomb attack also claimed the lives of five policemen.

institutionalized contours? Could the unsettled and shifting forms of Judge Falcone's commemoration stabilize, and perhaps become fixed, through the institutionalization process launched by the Falcone Foundation?

My fieldwork began by consulting archived graphic materials held at the Falcone Foundation. Grounding my argument on the premise of the performativity of writing in posttraumatic contexts (Fraenkel 2002), I investigated not only what these writings "said," but also what they "did." In addition to these materials, I used biographies of Giovanni Falcone written by people involved in various ways in combating the Mafia. The aim of this literature—produced by journalists with the help of citizens who played the role of "witnesses"—was to reveal the dark, contentious, and controversial side of anti-Mafia remembrance. As such, the anti-Mafia literature was to be considered not as "mere literature" but as a form of political action.

Looking to expand the scope of my research from a particular site—the "Falcone Tree" and the related Falcone Foundation—to the entire city, I studied the ways in which anti-Mafia history was inscribed in the topography of Palermo. Makeshift memorials had spontaneously sprung up at the scenes of murders perpetrated by "the Mafia." What was the relationship between these spontaneous forms of commemoration and the commemorative program instituted by the Italian state? In a broader context, what was the public policy on writing about Mafia victims? There were essentially two aspects to this policy: one was educational, involving educational activities in primary and secondary schools across Sicily and Italy,¹⁷ while the other was based on town planning initiatives that involved naming streets after "Mafia victims" and, in the case of the most prominent of these "victims," erecting monuments in their names. The comparative analysis of different types of writing, ranging from banners to epitaphs, from placards to street names, showed how hard it is to transform the ephemeral traces of commitment to anti-Mafia ideals into permanent signs of the Mafia's power of destruction. Likewise, it also showed how difficult it was to institutionalize the memory of the Mafia and to choose between contradictory statements concerning its "victims" owing to the institutionalized connivance between the Mafia and the state, with the latter ultimately deciding what is worth remembering.

The permanence of the emotional register and the difficulties of establishing a memorial are linked to the reversibility of every statement related to the Mafia's responsibility. Naming the "Mafia victims" is also to point out their aggressors and their possible connections to the state. A literature tackling how institutional authorities thwarted those judges considered as national heroes has demonstrated how the "true story" of the struggle between the Mafia and the anti-Mafia is simply impossible to write given the diversity of conflicting memories. Given the impossibility of this narrative, all possibilities of remembrance are deployed, including those transient forms of writing that I was tempted to view as intermediary phases, occurring before memory is stabilized, and that have become permanent, perpetuating the "difficult remembrance" (U. Santino 2001) of anti-Mafia memory.

17. Paula Salvio has taken up this topic and developed it in an important work (Salvio 2017).

However, this embarrassment when it comes to naming victims and culprits is not only related to a political configuration of collusion between the Mafia and the state, in charge of the institutional processes of attributing responsibilities. It is rooted in the nature of the Mafia phenomenon, which is *ontologically* as well as *semantically* uncertain.¹⁸ At the end of my fieldwork on anti-Mafia knowledge practices and forms of accusation, I changed my focus, choosing the anti-Mafia judiciary as a privileged position for observing how the sense of the word “Mafia” was set down in sentences and fixed by the law.

Judging the silence

From traces to proofs: the Falcone method

As I stated earlier, in response to the question of the Mafia, judges and citizens have experimented with innovative modalities of mobilization and inquiry in order to provide an ontological basis for a social fact that *did not exist*—a basis necessary to every form of struggle, judgment, and repression. Activists and prosecutors understood perfectly that the anti-Mafia fight, in order to fight the Mafia silence, revolved around words, definitions, descriptions, and statements. Judges, lawyers, and activists have also grasped the performativity of Mafia silence and tried, in one way or another, depending on their place and their specialty, to oppose it with the force of words, written on banners and placards, in arrest warrants and sentences, or in anti-Mafia laws. The entire “Falcone method” is a heuristics of silence. Because he himself was Sicilian, the judge knew what silence is made of and wherein lies its power; but he also knew its loopholes. The Mafiosi do not speak, but they act, and their acting leaves *traces*, traces that can be, where applicable, transformed into *proof* of their criminal acts. The first phase of anti-Mafia inquiries sought to follow the “Mafia” money trail left in the national and international banking systems. This would lead to the first lawsuit filed and won against the “Mafia” at the start of the 1980s: the “Spatola Trial.” Checks, transfers, purchases, and banknotes enabled prosecutors to reconstruct all the financial transactions of the defendants since 1975, leading to the indictment of the Italian-American Spatola–Gambino–Inzerillo clan.

While anthropologists of the period published monographs on the Mafia in Sicily (Blok 1975; Schneider and Schneider 1976) based on field research and localized archival searches, prosecuting judges formulated new responses to the question “What is the Mafia?” leading to the emergence of a model of globalized crime that aligned with the new social perceptions of the Mafia (Puccio-Den 2008b).¹⁹ Their inquiries were indeed able to rely on their capacity to closely track the criminal action of the Mafia, thanks to the intrusive capacity of the judicial

18. On the role played by institutions in fixing the semantics of social reality, see Boltanski [2009] 2011.

19. In reality, both local and global models are pertinent to the description of Mafia action, which articulates the local and the global according to their own particular logic (Campana 2011, 2013; Varese 2011). Several years later, setting out from the same question (“What do the Mafia do?”), anthropologists like Paolo Campana and Federico Varese applied mathematical methods of network modeling to Mafia communication systems, specifically in relation to certain Camorra groups in the Naples region, using wiretaps of telephone conversations between Camorristas as an empirical database.

police and the empirical materials available to them. Thus, even today, the “Falcone method” comprises a model of investigation followed by the anti-Mafia judiciary in Italy and abroad. Moreover, it has been adopted by teams of researchers (sociologists, anthropologists, and criminologists) who reconstruct Mafia networks using mathematical models based on actions (criminal and noncriminal) and acts of communications (meetings, phone calls) linking the “Mafiosi” among themselves.²⁰

But this was not the only condition for renewing knowledge about the Mafia. Falcone realized that the first battle against the Mafia would have to be conducted within the judiciary itself. During his early years, first in the small city of Trapani as an investigating judge specialized in legal liquidations, then in the capital of Sicily, he understood that factions, compartmentalized knowledge, jealousies, the withholding of information and data within each Sicilian bureau of investigation, all posed obstacles to the perception of a phenomenon whose unitary nature was beginning to be inferred. Here, too, the monographic survey had to give way to a model more adapted to the studied reality: a network of criminal groups united by shifting relationships, but nonetheless constituting a single organization—as had been predicted by some of the sentences issued by pioneering magistrates, who would pay for their intuition with their lives.²¹ Falcone thus became the promoter of a method of collective inquiry and provided the fight against the Mafia with a powerful new device inherited from the fight against terrorism: the “anti-Mafia pool.” Within this framework, that was an innovative working environment as well as a new mental framework, conceived by the head of the investigation office, Rocco Chinnici, before his assassination in 1983, each prosecuting judge had to share the partial results of the inquiries with this team, since, though each detail by itself might not make sense, it could acquire a new meaning when inserted into the larger picture. For the very first time, judges transmitted the results of their investigations on the Mafia in Sicily, and this pooling of knowledge broke the Mafia silence, itself made of partial knowledge and missing pieces (Dino 2013).

Falcone and the other members of the anti-Mafia pool (Paolo Borsellino, Giuseppe Di Lello, and Leonardo Guarnotta, under the heading of Antonio Caponnetto) had the intuition that the fight against *omertà* should be conducted from within, shaking up the usual way of thinking, acting, and working of the legal community to promote best practices. The anti-Mafia pool was, perhaps, the first and only research laboratory experiment on the Mafia to come into being. This laboratory was equipped with the heuristic methods of ethnographic inquiry (Puccio 2001). We have seen the importance attached to empirical data by Giovanni Falcone, who founded a new model of the Mafia—connecting the local to the global, Sicily to the United States, the “family” to the worldwide network—on the basis of Mafia actions and the *traces* that these leave in the world. The same judge made his way through the Mafia universe by using “informants.” Others before him had used mediators, “spies,” or “informers” (Lupo 2006), undoubtedly. But the big difference resided in the judge’s attitude vis-à-vis his “informants,” whom he considered not just as pure and simple sources of information, but as reflexive beings, able to produce explanatory and interpretive instruments

20. Especially in the United States, thanks to the contacts Falcone made during his time spent with the FBI.

21. Cesare Terranova, assassinated in 1979, was the sole signatory of a sentence (*Processo di Catanzaro*, 1968) that hypothesized the unitary nature of the Mafia.

of their own universe. The parallelism with the ethnographic method makes it possible to list the stages of this human and intellectual endeavor: from the “evidential paradigm” (Ginzburg [1986] 1989), used to read and connect the traces of Mafia action (like the traces left by an animal and followed by the pursuing hunter), Falcone shifts to the initiatory paradigm, leaving his “key informant,” Tommaso Buscetta, to teach him how interpret the gathered data—exactly as the French ethnologist Marcel Griaule did with his native “initiator” Ogotemmely (Clifford 1988).

The first discovery the judge made was that the Mafia “didn’t exist” as such for Mafiosi, who called their association “Cosa Nostra” and themselves “men of honor” (Arlacchi 1994: 15). Cosa Nostra was “their own business,” setting up boundaries between insiders and outsiders, establishing rules for membership and sharing information. That was the very core of this secret society (Simmel 1906), and that was also the subject matter of Falcone’s inquiry, which, more than being a simple criminal investigation, took the form of an “initiation.” Omertà was no more a wall separating two different worlds, as long as Falcone exploited all the possibilities of silence as a shared code of communication grounded in the same cultural background. ~~Shifting from omertà to silence, this latter, but.~~ None of this would have been possible, though, without the judge mastering the Mafia language—that is, the silence, its expressive possibilities, its nuances and inflections: the language of gestures, the facial mimicry, the unsaid, the metaphors (or the art of saying one thing under the guise of another), the hanging phrases and pauses in speech, everything that allows one to say what is not explicitly said, the implicit. This mastery of the local codes of communication created the conditions of possibility for an unprecedented dialogue between the judge and the Mafia member, paving the way for both a new knowledge of the Mafia and the phenomenon of Mafia “repentance.” This term, taken up again in the fight against terrorism, lends itself to confusion owing to its religious resonance (Puccio-Den 2014). Far from being rooted in an inner movement, though, “repentance” here is the outcome of an unprecedented form of interaction between Mafiosi and prosecuting judges, stressing the interactive processes that shape culture and its transmission (Clifford and Marcus 1986).²² This is how the magistrate “took seriously” (Boltanski and [1991] 2006) the arguments and justifications of his “informant,” rather than labeling them—as some anthropologists have recently done (Rakopoulos 2018)—with religious terms like “repentance,” “penitents,” or “confessions” (Puccio-Den 2019a)

Indeed, if Falcone secularized this figure, it was not simply to protect it from any kind of ideological use which would have weakened it: he also wanted to take into account the moral attitude of his interlocutors when they declared, as Buscetta did, that they “did not repent” (Arlacchi 1994: 3) or separated their debt to the state from their debt to God. As a matter of fact, Falcone was not content to obtain information. He assumed the normative bases of the world that he studied, and established operational principles—the information provided by Buscetta and other “Mafiosi” was reliable because the latter adopted a double rule (of life): silence vis-à-vis the state, and truth vis-à-vis their own hierarchical superiors. For Falcone, the challenge, then, was to be recognized as a “man of honor” by his

22. Because of this fact, perhaps, both sides prefer the term “collaboration” to the term “repentance,” which emphasizes just one pole of the interaction (the “repentant”).

interlocutor, Tommaso Buscetta, in order for the latter to feel able to confide his secrets to him, just as he would have with a Mafia leader. This implies that, in the eyes of the Mafioso, the judge embodied an ideal of “just justice” that could be superimposed on “Mafia justice,” precisely at the moment when the latter was in crisis (Puccio 2001). It was on this paradox that the dialogue between certain Mafiosi and certain judges was constructed, later formalized in law under the terms of “collaboration with the justice system.” This encounter provided information from the inside of the Mafia that led to a complete rethinking of the interpretive paradigm of the Mafia phenomenon. Social sciences researchers were forced to recognize these new empirical findings and revise their own theorizations concerning the Mafia.

My ethnographic inquiry came “after Falcone”: that is to say, at a historical moment when the epistemological and moral conditions of all research on the Mafia had already changed profoundly compared to the first fieldwork conducted by foreign anthropologists in the 1970s. Mafiapcraft takes up the epistemological model founded by Falcone and the methodological approach pursued by the anti-Mafia judges in their inquiries in order to analyze the way in which the latter structure the question “What is the Mafia?” Here epistemology and ethics converge, since the answers that were found to this question, from one inquiry to the next, one trial to the next, completely altered the “moral economies” (Fassin 2009) of Italian society—and even those of the Mafia micro-society living within it. These modifications are very often contained in a single phrase. The same statement does not have the same mode of existence or the same ontological consequences for the people involved, depending on whether it is pronounced in the form of a *rumor* or a judicial truth. This is what we shall see through the following case study.

“Giuseppe Impastato killed by the Mafia here, May 9, 1978”: the history of a rumor

May 9, 1978. A body torn apart by an explosion is found on the tracks of the railway station in Cinisi, a village in the province of Palermo. The *carabinieri* head to the scene, carry out their inspections, and, back at the police station, submit a report in which they identify the remains of the corpse as belonging to the young anti-Mafia activist Giuseppe Impastato, leader of a far left party. The police classify the event as the “criminal act of a kamikaze terrorist.” The same day, the body of the president of the Christian Democracy Party, Aldo Moro, is found in a car in Rome. Claimed by the Red Brigades, this “terrorist” act elicits a wave of emotion throughout the country. The police version of Impastato’s death is accepted uncontested. The resounding murder of former Italian prime minister Aldo Moro—the most serious among the acts of terrorism carried out by the extremist groups “Brigade Rosse” during the “years of lead”—was used to cover by silence the Mafia murder of a left-wing activist. This kind of attempt by the powers to shut dissonant voices was a proven skill for local and state representatives who felt their position threatened by the anti-Mafia claims (U. Santino 1998).

But another version of the event immediately circulated in the form of a *rumor* in the village of Cinisi: “Giuseppe Impastato was killed by the Mafia,” or, more precisely, “Giuseppe Impastato was killed by the Mafioso Gaetano Badalamenti,” target of the young activist’s denunciations. At night, Giuseppe’s comrades had planted a sign on the crime scene, which read, in large letters painted in black and white: “Giuseppe Impastato killed by the

Mafia here, May 9, 1978.” This denunciation, which, at that time, had no right to citizenship or legitimate status in Cinisi, would become a judicial truth twenty-five years later, when Gaetano Badalamenti and Salvatore Palizzolo were accused of being the “instigators” behind Impastato’s murder. In the meantime, Impastato had been recognized as a “victim of the Mafia.” My work involved following these phrases, or bits of phrases, step-by-step, passing from one space to another—from street to court, Cinisi to Palermo, the local scene to the national scene, the event itself to the construction of an anti-Mafia cause—in order to ascertain how they became transformed, and in turn transformed the status of the people concerned.

Following phrases implies following the actions that the phrases *make exist*: the comrades of Giuseppe Impastato had to take the initiative in conducting a counterinvestigation to present new evidence to the Palermo Prosecutor’s Office, which was less compromised than the Cinisi police with local authorities in collusion with the Mafia; transformations were needed within the judiciary, enabling a new generation of prosecuting judges to emerge in the main Sicilian towns, open to listening to the unheard, and ready to try to render it audible, plausible, and credible; these judges had to be able to reformulate the demands of Giuseppe’s mother and brother for “revenge” and “honor” in terms of “justice” and ‘truth’; changes had to be made in national politics and judicial history in order to discredit political power and reveal its involvements with the Mafia; the word “Mafia” and the phrase “victim of the Mafia” had to enter Italian legislation and acquire a legal and judicial meaning; the term “terrorism” had to be assigned to Mafia actions, after spectacular attacks had made evident the menace posed by the Mafia to society as a whole; and the large majority of citizens had to feel concerned by the anti-Mafia cause and the latter no longer associated with the political marginality of a few extremists. But for all this to be possible, it was necessary to speak, write, and not remain silent, using all available media in the process: books, brochures, flyers, photographs, newspaper articles, law articles, denunciations, judgments. Mafiapcraft considers all these media with one and the same regard, without hierarchizing them as more or less legitimate, trying to grasp, beyond the messages that they convey, the discursive levels on which they *act*.

I have analyzed the Impastato case as an “affair” (Claverie 1992, 1994)—a “political form” inherited from the Enlightenment that allows us to think about the reversibility of judicial truths—and simultaneously as a “testing of the state” (Linhardt 2002)—a moment for requalifying all the people and entities involved, including the Italian state, which the anti-Mafia struggle had helped unify and centralize (Puccio-Den 2012). Microscopic and macroscopic changes, articulated in a complex-scale game, gradually led to the indictment of the Italian state as an “accomplice” of the Mafia. The very complex history of Italy was reviewed and reinterpreted in the light of anti-Mafia trials (Caselli, Montanaro, and Ruotolo 1995), and the terrorism itself—from the “years of lead” (1960s–1980s) to the “strategy of terror” used by the Mafia during the transition from the First to the Second Republic (at the beginning of the 1990s)—had to be reconsidered as a political tool undermining democracy. The Cosa Nostra generally does not claim that it may have a political nature, but de facto its imbrication in the Italian state apparatus and the close relations between some politicians and Cosa Nostra characters suggest that a clear-cut distinction between criminal action and political action cannot be drawn in Italy (Lodato and Scarpinato 2008). The Sicilian writer

and intellectual Leonardo Sciascia once said that the Italian state could fight against terrorism, but not against the Mafia, the first one being “against the state,” while the second one was “within the state.”²³ Recent court rulings with regard to the “*Trattativa*” has identified in this “bargaining” between the Mafia and the Italian state at the beginning of the 1990s linking the cessation of Mafia violence against state representatives and civil population with a relaxing of anti-Mafia legislation the last of a series of many terrorist acts or attacks on democracy covered, if not incited, by the ones who should guarantee it. As the “Via D’Amelio ruling” replacing the murder of Judge Paolo Borsellino less than two months after the assassination of Judge Falcone as an element in the chain of state liability in Mafia acts, and Mafia acts of silence (U. Santino 1998).

However, this “Copernican revolution” in the frameworks of responsibility for Mafia actions was primarily indebted to the transformation in the epistemological frameworks used to apprehend the Mafia phenomenon. Because to be able to affirm that Gaetano Badalamenti and Salvatore Palizzolo—the Mafia “instigators” of the murder of Peppino Impastato—had been “responsible,” it was necessary to rethink the model used to describe Mafia action. Action that involves not just *committing* crimes but also *inciting* crimes. According to the Italian penal code, committing a crime and inciting a person to commit a crime are equivalent (Articles 40 and 41). Nevertheless, it was difficult to prove a defendant’s role in inciting crimes in many of the Cosa Nostra prosecutions until Falcone and his fellow judges worked out a way to follow traces that could provide evidence of culpability in a climate of silence and disavowal. Silence appears here as a stratified, diversified, and layered substance. Not a “wall,” as it has so often been described, but a veil of multiple layers that needed to be lifted one-by-one to answer the question “What is the Mafia?” and solve all the other moral and political conundrums surrounding this issue. As an outcome of a reflection on the rituals of “masking and unveilings” and their role in the construction of female gender (Puccio 2002), Mafiacraft follows these operations step-by-step, showing how they enable a reformulation of the social order and its feminine part.²⁴

“What is the Mafia?” The history of a theorem

One of the obstacles to curbing Mafia crime is the fact that not only is the crime scene hidden, a secret as in so many ordinary crimes, it is also incomplete, leaving in the shadows what the anti-Mafia judge Roberto Scarpinato calls (based on the etymological meaning of the term) the *ob-scene*: that which remains “off stage,” a space where deadly resolutions are taken and where deadly orders are given. It is at this level of action that silence acts most effectively. These backstage areas frame the crime because, without them and what happens within them, the scene itself would more than likely not take place. According to some anti-Mafia judges, it is at this level, structuring and matrix-like at the same time, that action needs to take place if

²³ Sciascia developed this difference between Mafia and terrorism through a series of articles published in mass-circulation newspapers (as the *Corriere della Sera*), gathered in a book after his death (Sciascia 1989).

²⁴ Anti-Mafia action has been linked with feminist claims since the beginning of the anti-Mafia movement, including in the pioneering vision promoted by Giuseppe Impastato. This topic will be developed by me in a forthcoming work entitled “The gender of the Mafia.”

the anti-Mafia struggle is to be effective and lasting. From the anthropological point of view, the articulation between the scene and the “obscene” of the crime allows the question of action to be posed: What is a collective action? How are action and speech (Pitrou 2012), death and the order to kill, connected? What is an actor or an *author* of an act (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994)? And what, ultimately, is a subject? So many questions which the Mafia posed to society and which, far more than anthropologists of the Mafia, the anti-Mafia judges tried to answer. This is why Mafiacraft places the latter at the heart of the ethnographic inquiry.

Prior to the judicial question of responsibility, establishing “proof” of the Mafia raises the anthropological problem of action and its description (Laidlaw 2014; Puccio-Den 2017a). Mafiacraft is interested in the viewpoint of actors: whether their reflexive viewpoint on their own actions (for the “Mafiosi”) or their viewpoint on the actions of others (for the “judges”). The conceptual endeavor made by men and women confronted by the question “What is the Mafia?” is not so far removed from the cognitive work undertaken to solve other “mysteries” surrounding beings and entities that cannot be grasped empirically, the latter also being domains where *proof* is demanded.²⁵ When the lawyers tried to define “what the Mafia is,” they sought to apprehend its *manifestations*: unlike most social researchers, they did not essentialize this “thing” that some called “Cosa Nostra”; they adopted the viewpoint of the action or “behaviors” that *manifested its presence*. These conducts or “methods” alone would have determined—in law, if not in fact—an individual’s membership of a Mafia-type association (Article 416 bis of the Italian penal code), the existence of the latter *logically* resulting from the former just as a conclusion derives from its premises.

However, these behaviors defining what a Mafioso (and consequently what the Mafia) is remain no less difficult to prove. More than acts, these are *non-acts* or acts that are not (necessarily) realized, such as *intimidation*; *non-words* or words unspoken, as in *omertà*; and a *condition* negatively affecting the subject and his or her language: *subjugation* (or desubjectivation). This law nevertheless marked a considerable advance at an ontological level since it amounted to a *tautological demonstration* of the existence of the Mafia (Turone 2008: 25), *de jure* and *de facto*. At this level of analysis, Mafiacraft is close to witchcraft, both paradigms being concerned with the way in which the legal system qualifies certain behaviors in order to provide the ontological foundation to social categories with uncertain contours (“witch” or “Mafioso”). In both cases, the law plays a founding and structuring role, acting at the level of “words,” words that constitute the very substance of this type of phenomenon (Favret-Saada [1977] 1980).

However, there is an essential element that distinguishes witches and the Mafiosi. The latter *go beyond words*: they *act*. Because what precisely do the Mafiosi do besides *intimidating*, *keeping silent* or *silencing*, *subjugating* and *being subjugated* to an authority other than the state (calling into question the latter’s sovereignty) to deserve the penal attention of prosecuting judges and the alarm of citizens? They kill, defraud, attack, whitewash, pollute, alter, corrupt, ruin . . . In other words, they are inscribed in the real, manipulating it, modifying it, and leaving *traces* that can be constituted as *proof* of actions, not generically harmful, but “criminal,” according to the norms in force in our democratic

25. I should point out that my work was preceded by an inquiry into the nature of the relations between the sexes (Puccio 2002) and the ambiguous status of religious images (Puccio-Den 2009).

states. Some authors have drawn parallels between anti-Mafia justice, or the fight against terrorism, and inquisitorial procedures (Sciascia 1989; Ginzburg [1991] 2002). However, the judicial struggle against the Mafia did not “criminalize” “innocent” popular practices, as in the case of the nocturnal agrarian cults of Friuli, transformed into “witchcraft” by the Inquisition (Ginzburg [1966] 1983), or the lucubration of a literate miller, transformed into “heresy” by the same repressive institution (Ginzburg [1976] 1980). Anti-Mafia justice, supported by the anti-Mafia movement and in the same liberating spirit, revealed the *connection* between certain *proven* crimes and certain individuals who evaded any criminal qualification and judicial control, sometimes with the assistance or complicity of the state.

Some crimes (assault, violence, murder) could be attributed to individuals on the basis of *signs* (weapons, traces of blood, personal items) traceable back to the executors, based on the standard procedures for producing police and judicial evidence. But the dissociation between instigator and executor, peculiar to Mafia criminal action, had the effect of obscuring the very structure of the crime. It was necessary to rely on the knowledge of individuals aware of this structure—and so necessarily Mafiosi, given its secret nature—in order to respond appropriately to the question “What is the Mafia?” The latter could supply other names connected to these same bloody events, but allowing a new reading to be given to them within a much larger criminal project. This new paradigm for describing the Mafia was the “Buscetta theorem,” named after the first Mafioso to make enunciation of the “Mafia” possible. This theorem postulates the unitary and hierarchical nature of the Mafia association Cosa Nostra, managed by a “commission,” a decision-making assembly whose members decide on the murders to be carried out. The legal and moral framework of responsibility shifts: henceforth those considered “guilty” and “responsible” for Mafia crimes are not only their executors, but also the members, all members of the “commission” as decision-makers, instigators, or “order givers.”

Here again, the approximation between Mafiacrft and witchcraft is tempting: Is the “Mafioso” not like the “witch” in being unfairly blamed for an *indirect* action? With regard to the Maxi Trial, which put the “Buscetta theorem” to the test, if we take the time to consult the court documents, we can note the colossal effort made by the prosecuting judges to establish precisely, on a case-by-case basis, the *connection* between speech and action, Mafia orders and Mafia murders. But, paradoxically enough, the proof of the existence of the “commission” was provided by the Mafia itself, in a test of strength with the state. The thousands of pages of investigations of the Maxi Trial, written by Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, and the hundreds of days of hearings (1986–87), had been devoted solely to demonstrating the “Buscetta theorem.” In 1992, shortly after confirmation of the legal validity of this “theorem” by the Court of Cassation, leading to the life sentencing of all the members of the “commission,” the two investigating judges were murdered in two spectacular attacks, a flagrant demonstration of the existence of the Mafia and its capacity to wreak havoc.

Another major advance was achieved at an ontological level: henceforth it was known not only that the Mafia *exists* but what it *is*. The Maxi Trial opened with a previously unheard phrase: “This is the lawsuit brought against the Mafia association Cosa Nostra.” Finally the Mafia had been given a *name*; a *body* too, a collective body, one that could be counted by the hundreds of members sat behind the bars of the bunker court room built for the trial. With the bomb attacks on Judge Falcone and Judge Borsellino, the Mafia had made its thunderous

voice heard, displaying its “terrorist” nature. It was now a question of understanding what made it what it was, what made it live and so powerful, where its heart and brain resided. There were still zones of persistent silence, an obscene behind the obscene constituted by the “instigators” “outside” the Mafia world, and more generally by the “assistance” and support that the Mafia was able to find beyond the criminal world, allowing it to act criminally with impunity. The “Buscetta theorem” was basically a fairly partial description of “what the Mafia is.” The question shifted from the criminal world to society and from action to intention.

How does a Mafioso think? The question of intention

So the Mafia existed and now no one in Italy could ignore it, a fact that profoundly changed the country’s “moral economies” (Puccio-Den 2015), obliging people to make a choice between good and evil. The model of the Mafia resulting from the Maxi Trial had enabled the Mafia phenomenon to be identified by removing the aura of uncertainty that, by blurring its contours, had made any judicial decision difficult. But for some, it failed to reflect what the Mafia *really is*, given that the specificity of the latter was precisely not as a clearly identifiable criminal association, but rather as a *relational system* involving all sectors of society: political, economic, financial, not to mention the liberal professions and the church. Reaching the peripheral (but vital) areas of Mafia crime involved the development of even more refined and sophisticated legal and judicial instruments. This was achieved through the creation of new legal categories such as the “outside contribution to a Mafia association” or the *favoreggiamento* (“abetment” provided to evade investigations, “aggravated” by having been given to Mafiosi and thus to the Mafia).

On the basis of these new penal categories, new trials were instituted, the target of which was not Mafia crime per se but its “grey zones.” In 2006, I began to observe one of these trials: the “Aiello+14 Trial.” A renowned Sicilian doctor had been accused of Mafia association. Dr. Michele Aiello had been linked to the chief of the Cosa Nostra, Bernardo Provenzano, through an exchange of letters, which, at that time, shaped the Sicilian Mafia network (Puccio-Den 2016). Moreover, he ran a health facility in Palermo province, the hub of a colossal public money fraud. The doctor had enriched himself at the expense of the state with the complicity of officials of the local administration. Aiello had evaded judicial inquiries with the help of police officers and the president of the Sicilian region, Salvatore Cuffaro. All these distinguished people—doctors, civil servants, politicians, police officers—occupied different positions in the chessboard of Mafia accusations, here laid out in all its extent: from “participation” to “outside contribution” to “simple” or “aggravated” *favoreggiamento*. A fierce controversy had broken out among the Anti-Mafia Directorate (DIA) of Palermo over which charges should be mobilized against this or that defendant. My fieldwork took place in this conflict-ridden environment, and I tried, as far as I could, to escape unscathed from that which “affected” me.²⁶

26. A concept taken from Jeanne Favret-Saada and the way in which she was “captured” by her inquiry into witchcraft. Here again, it is worth stressing that the danger for the ethnologist working on the Mafia extends beyond the power of words to “affect” him or her. See: <http://gspm.ehess.fr/docannexe.php?id=1505>.

The trial presented a human gallery of characters difficult to fit into criminal or moral categories; individuals pleading their “innocence” at the same time as their “ignorance” of the moral content of their own actions, advancing an assortment of excuses ranging from “I didn’t know” to “I was unaware” to “I wanted no part.” It was left to the judges to decide between these different cognitive and moral attitudes and their implication of different frameworks of responsibility. “Participation” in a Mafia association, “outside contribution,” and *favoreggiamento* are based on a conception of the criminal as someone who participates in, contributes toward, or abets crime in full knowledge and consciousness of their acts. But did this idea—or ideal—of a man who *intentionally* performs his actions fit with the notion of the “Mafioso” as someone “subjugated by” the “Mafia” as well as “subjugating” his surroundings to the same authority (Puccio-Den 2017e)?

After his initiation, the first rule that the Mafioso man learns is “obedience,” the form to which he must conform his being. His principal quality is *knowing how to keep silent*. Downstream, this means, of course, not recounting his criminal activities. Upstream, even more important to “making a Mafioso”—since it is on the basis of this quality that the future “men of honor” will be selected—he must not query the criminal actions he is asked to perform. Disconnected from his own intention, the Mafioso sees his own actions as *nonintentional*—even if they are not so from a legal viewpoint—and makes himself *unresponsible*. It is only *afterwards*, when he recounts them to the judge and assumes them as his own, taking the perspective of the legal system, that he realizes their significance. He may then regret his actions, “repent,” and decide to “collaborate with the justice system.” But this regret will arise from a reformulation of these actions in his own name and in the first person in a face-to-face interaction with the judge: a speech act, therefore, and not an act of faith (Puccio-Den 2017c).

It is language that modifies the ontology of action. Hence the implicit force of *knowing-how-to-keep-silent*, this skill specific to certain contexts of political violence and domination, acquired by controlling the tools of language and by imposing silence (or, in a visual dimension, by *invisibilization*). Here Maficraft is the inverse of witchcraft, since it reveals how power—in those places where it does not construct a legal and cognitive framework to criminalize certain behaviors and certain social or ethnic categories (Fassin [2017] 2018)—deconstructs, disconnects, and obscures large swathes of its own criminal action. *Keeping silent* is the first step of imposing silence and a powerful way to *make someone do something*, since as long as it is covered by silence, and thus disconnected from the subject’s will, the action does not fully belong to the actor, who does not consider himself to be the author in a full sense (Puccio-Den 2017e). *Knowing how to keep and how to impose silence* (*far tacere*) and knowing how to *make someone do something* (*far fare*) thus appear as two techniques of power centered on the possibility of *disconnecting* the subject from his language, a way of *subjugating* or desubjectifying him. Anthropologists have developed theories of ritual action—also characterized by a discrepancy between the act and the language used to describe it, a misuse that entails a loss of meaning of the performed action (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994)—which can be extremely useful in understanding *what the Mafia is*, pushing us to analyze Mafia crime as a modality of social and political action (Puccio-Den 2017e)

Ultimately, Mafiacraft proposes an anthropological paradigm for thinking about the Mafia, as well as other phenomena linked to power and its relation to language and silence. Intimidation, *omertà*, and subjugation, the three “behaviors” that the jurists picked out to define the Mafia per se—in its essence, we could say—are found in many other non-Italian and noncriminal contexts. Mafiacraft is thus a study of the *form of silence*, and its substance. I have studied the latter through the different social, legal, and cognitive modalities developed to combat the Mafia in Italy since the 1970s, when to pronounce, write, or photograph the word “Mafia” was a revolutionary act, literally something *unheard*, an aggression and transgression of a taboo comparable to removing the mask of a masked individual during carnival. I set out from the ethnographic observation of different contexts and milieus (activist, associative, legal, judicial, civic) in which behind the question “What is the Mafia?” lurked another question of how to construct the *know-how* and *know-how-to-say* relevant to and effective in breaking the silence. This led me to see what the silence is *made* of, how it is maintained, and what it, in turn, allows to be maintained. At this juncture, it seems to me possible to conclude that it enables the maintenance of a state of *semantic uncertainty*, which also has a very high degree of performativity because it allows everything to be done and to make someone do without anyone being responsible, facilitating all kinds of violence, as extensive as undetermined. Whether it is done *without being known* or *without being made known* is a subtle difference linked to “good faith” or “bad faith” and to the belief systems associated with it (Mannoni 1964). The latter are based on speech acts that anthropologists can describe and analyze. This, at least, is the challenge that Mafiacraft has set itself.

The silence has for me *the shape of water*.²⁷ Forms of extreme violence can creep in and nestle within this uncertain space, but also forms of pleasure, as shown by other works on carnival, on the night, and on dance (Puccio 2002; Puccio-Den 2016, 2017d). Mafiacraft is thus one stage of a larger, multidimensional project that aims not only to think about phenomena that evade qualification (and thus scientific description) but also to invent innovative and creative methodological tools to empower ethnographers. Mafiacraft is a political anthropology of silence that looks to open out into an even larger and promising project: an ethnography of silence (Puccio-Den 2020).

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27. *The shape of water* is a 2017 American romantic dark fantasy film directed by Guillermo del Toro. The story follows a “mute cleaner” at a high-security government laboratory who falls in love with a captured humanoid amphibian creature. The aquatic metaphor, followed in its most minute details, perfectly represents a silent world inhabited by hybrid creatures in stark contrast with the violent environment surrounding it.

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