



Cosa Nostra: a historical and sociological analysis of the Mafia organization

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Abstract

The study focuses on two key dimensions: the historical and sociological aspects of the Mafia, examining in detail the evolution from an "old Mafia" to a "new Mafia" and identifying key distinctions between Cosa Nostra and other criminals. The organization of Cosa Nostra is analysed, breaking down key elements such as the organization's goals, internal roles, the recruitment process, the steps to officially become a mafioso, and the rules that govern Cosa Nostra's operations. This paper also explores the meaning and importance of Mafia language as a communication tool within the organization. The main objective of this paper is to provide an in-depth understanding of the Mafia as a complex phenomenon by analysing the historical context and contextualizing its sociological evolution. Detailed analysis of organizational aspects, rules and language helps shed light on the inner workings of Cosa Nostra, providing a solid basis for understanding this unique criminal phenomenon. It is intended to contribute to the existing literature on the subject, offering new perspectives and insights useful for future studies and for the formulation of strategies for countering and preventing.

Keywords: mafia; crime; criminal organization; illegal behavior.

1. Introduction

“Mafiosi” were first mentioned in 1862-63. The mobster presents himself as a guardian of the weak, the wretched, and resorts to violence to oppose the power of the rich. What

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makes the mafioso such is a set of values and beliefs that distinguish his way of thinking, living and acting. The aspiring mafioso when he joins Cosa Nostra abandons his most authentic feelings, abandons his old friends, old relationships; from initiation onward only other "men of honour" will count. Cosa Nostra is an organization that pursues its own objectives, which may be enrichment and extortion in order to impose authority as opposed to that of the state. The "architecture" of Cosa Nostra reflects that of the family and re-proposes its objectives. The basic member of the "family" is the man of honour or soldier who performs an important function within the "family," he, in fact, by his actions tends to increase its power. The personality characteristics that an individual must possess based on which Mafia selection takes place represent the stereotypical Sicilian male.

The rite of affiliation represents the moment when the affiliate makes explicit his or her consent to join Cosa Nostra, its objectives and the means by which to pursue them. As in any organization, Cosa Nostra also has its rules, but these are not written anywhere, because they are inscribed in the mind during the long teaching process to which the future man of honour was subjected in the family. The actions of mafiosi highlight a deviation from social norms; the gangster Mafia reveals itself to be a state within the state. Mafiosi were first mentioned in 1862-63, in a highly successful popular comedy entitled precisely "I mafiusi di la Vicaria," and set in 1854 among the camorrist inmates of the Palermo prison. The Mafia has been seen as a mirror of traditional society, with a focus on political, economic, or more often socio-cultural factors; as an enterprise or type of criminal industry; as a more or less centralized secret organization; as a legal system parallel to that of the state, that is, as an anti-state. Regarding the old Mafia, most authors see it as a reaction to the baronage of the wretched, the weak and opposed to the overpowering of the barons, the lords. In reference to the new Mafia, it is appropriate to ask whether baronage or, rather, the spirit of baronage has faded. In Sicily, Mafia violence arises from deep feelings of powerlessness, it develops as a reaction to passivity and an attempt to react to powerlessness; this attempt is carried out in destructive ways. The Mafia obtains solidarity, even today, from the masses of the wretched, the segregated groups, who have a deep distrust of the state; the crisis of structures, the social marginalism that characterize some institutions favour delinquent associations, forms of violence at the individual or group level. If the ancient Mafia had a mediating function between social classes, the new Mafia presents itself as a control of power, indeed a struggle for power for the exclusive profit of the mobsters, who, adapting to the industrial economy, resort to new methods and pursue new ends. The new Mafia no longer protects the wretched, it abandons the mediating functions of the old Mafia; the new protégés are industrialists, politicians, singers, actors, directors of film or record companies, it penetrates sports circles to the point of controlling and deciding on all sorts of competitions or sport events (Bonanno 1985).

1. What distinguishes Cosa Nostra from other criminals and why we speak of "organization"

Let us try to highlight what is the core of Mafia sentiment, what is the core of values that makes the Mafioso a category on its own that distinguishes it from other criminals, characterizing it as being part of a criminal elite springing from ancient cultural roots that are purely and entirely Sicilian.



1. *family context*: it has been repeatedly stated that it is the family and in particular the mother figure who is the repository of the mafioso's reference values. The cultural universe of reference is an all-male universe, where being mafioso means first and foremost being a man, not having feelings, being strong, courageous, feeling superior to others; despising the feminine, feelings, weakness, homosexuality (Lo Verso and Federico 1993). The Mafia apprentice, if he comes from a historically Mafia family, sweet there is already a "man of honour," will copy his attitudes and deeds, will feel proud to have been chosen amongst all others for his characteristics of courage and reliability, to be part of this criminal elite that is Cosa Nostra. The would-be mafioso will look up to the exploits of his father or other figurehead, show courage and callousness from an early age, or grow confident in the affection and silent respect of Mafia women;

2. *social context*: the aspiring mafioso, upon joining Cosa Nostra, renounces his most authentic feelings and abandons old friendships and relationships. From initiation onwards, only "men of honour" and emotions that conform to traditional practices passed down for decades by the organization will be relevant. This marks the beginning of a double life for the "man of honour", based on a two-faced morality. By maintaining sober behaviour and low visibility, with an appearance of legitimate activity and a well-structured family, the "man of honour" preserves his social cover. A different, but increasingly frequent, discussion concerns those coming from common crime who aspire to a leap in quality, trying to become part of Cosa Nostra. Perhaps this last development, the recourse to subjects from outside the family traditions of Cosa Nostra, may represent a sign of weakness of the organization, which needs soldiers willing to do anything and who are in a condition of psychological and moral subjection to the boss, who is increasingly being mythologized (Brancato 1986);

3. *the interpersonal context*: the aspiring mafioso when he joins Cosa Nostra abandons his most authentic feelings, abandons his old friends, old relationships; from initiation onward only the other "men of honour" count, the feelings and practices admitted by the organization according to traditional patterns handed down for decades. With initiation begins for the "man of honour" a double life that is based on a double morality. The man of honour will keep sober behaviour, will be inconspicuous, will have a semblance of legitimate work, and will have a well-structured family. Cosa Nostra does not allow stable extramarital relationships that can crack its monolithic image.

The man of honour generally regards women outside the group as "prostitutes," with whom one can have sexual relations but not even stable romantic relationships. Only the mother and wife are worthy of the highest consideration, in addition to the regular wives of leaders and other associates. The community of honourable men appreciates the man who boasts multiple sexual relationships with women, as this is confirmation that he is a true man capable of self-assertion without being overwhelmed by feelings. Sex and ritual

eating, almost like modern agape, often serve in Cosa Nostra to strengthen blood ties. Conviviality represents a crucial moment to test the loyalty of guests, and it is no coincidence that during the Mafia war many ferocious executions occurred through the deception of an invitation to share a meal. On these convivial occasions, women are categorically excluded. (Carli 1981). When a justice collaborator is asked about the meaning of being simultaneously religious and criminal, he usually replies that he has received all the sacraments, from baptism to marriage, and that he has shown respect towards the Church and priests. As a mafioso, he never perceived the actions carried out as negative, as they were considered in line with superior morality, almost a sort of reason of state. The mafioso lives aware of the constant presence of death; every mistake can be punished by death and even the suspicion of betrayal can lead to the same fate. The mafioso maintains an intimate relationship with death, having the ability to impose it with apparent ease. He himself with extreme ease imposes it; he himself with equal extreme ease can suffer it. Often the suspected man of honour is faced with a dilemma: to respond or not to respond to his boss's summons. To such meetings, one must go unarmed because it would be a grave offense to be discovered armed, but it may also happen that one never returns from such meetings. Equally serious, on the other hand, would be not to respond to such a summons, which could in theory be only clarifying, because it would mean confirming one's betrayal (Cosarrubea and Blandano 1991). The term Mafia implies a polymorphous phenomenon, with many faces, affecting different areas of collective life, especially the economy and politics, but also the everyday way of life. If Mafia is, therefore, a generic term indicating a complex phenomenon generated by a certain way of thinking and being, Cosa Nostra designates the organization of men of honour, a formal organization that pursues its own goals with its own methods, the extreme realization of this way of thinking and being. The existence of a formal Mafia organization was acquired by overcoming, over time, the many resistances from the institutional culture that denied its existence. The architecture of Cosa Nostra was reconstructed thanks to the revelations of several collaborators and the work of judges and investigators who worked for a long time in total isolation. For a time, the phenomenon was denied, and once it could no longer be denied, the formal aspect of it was denied, even though there was no lack of indicators of such an existence even through the voices of those who considered it from this point of view (Cinà 1995). According to Carli and Paniccia, organization is a social structure characterized by a system of defined i.e. expected roles, in a certain sense independently of the individuals who assume them and specific cultural mechanisms, and which has transformation as its goal (Carli and Paniccia 1981). The definition suggests the existence of rationality as a general characteristic of organizations, rationality of purposes, rationality of means, rules and ways to achieve them; and, finally, as an implicit result, rationality of the entire organizational structure (Kaneklin and Manoukian 1990). Rationality is a common feature of all organizations, as is the consensus they receive from those who join them; alongside these common features, each organization, being, in fact, characterized by its own roles and culture. Rationality refers to the mental set-up of awareness of those who adhere to an organization of which they share, rationally in fact, its goals and means to achieve them, while consensus concerns the nature of the bond that is established between those who adhere to the organization and the organization itself. Membership is based on sharing the organization's objectives and never on coercion, meaning that no one can be forced to join an organization without sharing its objectives and the means of achieving them (Correnti 1987).



2. The objectives and roles within Cosa Nostra

Cosa Nostra is an organization that pursues its own objectives, which may be enrichment and extortion to impose authority as opposed to that of the state. Behind these goals it is possible to identify the theme of stuff and power. The obsession with stuff and power creates the conditions for the organizational functioning of Cosa Nostra, particularly with regards to goals and the means to achieve them. The proper functioning of an organization depends on its ability to achieve the goals it sets for itself; this poses Cosa Nostra with the problem of change, because this depends on the achievement of goals, which is in turn connected to the transformations taking place in the environment over which it operates. Cosa Nostra, in fact, like any other organization, has a problem of internal credibility, linked to the achievement of objectives, which can be seriously compromised by failures; this, falling back on the organization itself, eventually undermines its functioning (D'Avanzano 1996). It is necessary to consider that the successes of the State push this organization to reorganize itself and it has, in the past, demonstrated an undoubted transformative capacity so much so that one can consider this very capacity a distinguishing feature of it from other criminal organizations. There is not a new and an old Mafia, the Mafia undergoes continuous changes to cope with the new demands that come to it from the reality that surrounds it, Cosa Nostra tirelessly adapts its methods to new times, making them gradually more sophisticated, it is always new because its means, its strategies are always functional to the historical moment in which it acts, to achieve such a degree of functionality, it undergoes continuous organizational changes that provide for the management changes that occur with the typical mechanisms of that organization: murder (Falcone and Padovani 1991). Cosa Nostra's architecture reflects that of the family and re-proposes its objectives. The roles envisaged in it are the familiar male ones, with the exclusion of the maternal role, which is entirely projected onto the organization itself. The basic cell of the organization is called, precisely, the "family," consisting of a certain number of men of honour, a number that varies from 50 to 300 members, headed by a head of the family. The "family" operates in a well-defined territory over which it attempts to extend its power. Within this territory all activities within it are within the knowledge of the "family" and can take place only with the consent of the head of the "family." The basic member of the "family" is the man of honour or soldier who

performs an important function within the "family," he, in fact, by his actions tends to increase its power. Membership in a powerful "family" is a reassuring element for those who belong to it. The head "family," just as it happens in any family, protects its interests, both regarding the activities that take place in the territory of competence, and with regard to the set of families, which constitute Cosa Nostra (Di Forti 1971). The "Capo Famiglia" is elected from among the men of honour belonging to a particular "family." Election is by secret ballot, almost always by unanimous vote, after contacts have taken place among the men of honour to sound out who among them is best able to represent the interests of the "family." The "Capo Famiglia" directly chooses the deputy "Capo Famiglia" and his advisers. Between the "Capo Famiglia" and the man of honour is the "capo decina", so called because he has ten soldiers under his orders. The head of the dozen can have contact with the head "family." The "family" chiefs in the same province elect in turn the provincial representative, the various provincial representatives are part of the regional commission, which is the governing body of the entire organization. The functionality of the Mafia organization depends on its centralized character; in fact, the more centralized and clandestine an organization is, the more terrible it is, because it has the means to effectively control the market and maintain order in its territory, with a very short interval between decision-making and entry into action (Falcone and Padovani 1991).

3. Recruitment

The personality characteristics that an individual must possess based on which Mafia selection takes place represent the stereotypical Sicilian male. Antonino Calderone argues that every man of honour feels that way and feels superior to any other thug (Arlacchi 1992). The mafioso if he has to kill, he kills without question and without asking any questions. Without letting out uncertainties and especially without having any. Without manifesting compassion (Falcone and Padovani 1991).

The recruitment of men of honour is not random but is done by following standardized procedures with strict selective criteria. Not everyone can join Cosa Nostra. This university of crime requires one to be valiant, capable of violent action and, therefore, to know how to kill. Knowing how to kill is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Belonging to a Mafia environment, relationships with men of honour constitute in the initial stage a great advantage (Falcone and Padovani 1991). The recruitment procedure involves an observation, a caring for the chosen individual, a teaching of him through a pedagogical mode that can be described as the passing on of notions from the older to the younger. One becomes a man of honour by family inheritance, though not by simple succession. Succession would be a risk because unworthy men, in the sense of unsuitable, for the needs of Cosa Nostra could be affiliated. For this reason, Calderone argues, there is an observation, a study of the best young men by the oldest (Arlacchi 1992). The chosen one at first does not know the intentions of the Mafia "family" that has become aware of him, however, and that has expectations of him. In the life of the boy living in a Mafia environment there is a moment when he begins to understand that his father, brothers, uncles are part of an inner circle. At this precise moment belonging to that group for the



boy is his only aspiration. There is a strong attraction to an idealized world in which the mobster is seen as a kind of authority, a person to whom everyone turns to ask favours, to solve problems (Arlacchi 1992). The family system of the mafiosi appears closed or even impermeable to external crossings, in it they have no ignition other than information from the family members themselves. In this sense it is a cultural system that informs itself. The church is not only a place to pray, but also a place of aggregation, a place to get acquainted and learn relational models different from those of the family, in other words, a place deputed to the teaching of values and ethical principles that may be dissonant with those proposed in the family.

The rite of affiliation represents the moment when the affiliate makes explicit his consent to join Cosa Nostra, its objectives and how to pursue them. The oath he is about to take will commit him for life (Falcone and Padovani, 1991). The sequence of the ceremony is as follows: the candidate is led to a secluded place where the ritual will take place. At the chosen location is the “Capo Famiglia” and other men of honour who are often lined up on one side. The presence of the “Capo Famiglia” and the other men of honour sanctions the re-appointment of the one about to be sworn in. The “Capo Famiglia” explains to the future man of honour what the Nostra is and what rules govern it. He warns him that there is still time to renounce affiliation. The candidate reaffirms his willingness to affiliate. In reality, renunciation would coincide with a sure death sentence. The “Capo Famiglia” invites the future man of honour to choose a godfather, a figure who will vouch for him and guarantee him in front of the entire "family." Then the oath-taking ceremony begins. The future man of honour is asked which hand he shoots with; on the index finger of that hand an incision is made from which a few drops of blood are drawn. At the same time the “Capo Famiglia” in a stern and threatening tone enjoins him never to betray, adding that one enters Cosa Nostra with blood and with blood one leaves. With the drops of blood, a sacred image is daubed, usually that of Our Lady of the Annunciation whose anniversary falls on March 25. The image is burned. The neophyte, trying not to let the fire go out, passes from one hand to the other the burning image and in the process swears never to betray Cosa Nostra deserving in case of betrayal to burn like the image. The rite of affiliation is concluded (Di Forti 1982).

4. Cosa Nostra's rules and its language

As in any organization, Cosa Nostra also has its rules, but they are not written anywhere, because they are inscribed in the mind during the long teaching process to which the future man of honour was subjected in the family. The rules of Cosa Nostra represent the exasperation of typically Sicilian values and behaviour (Falcone and Padovani 1991),

reflecting in an exaggerated way Mafia thinking; they are functional to the existence of the Mafia family. The guiding rules that apply in Cosa Nostra are those of loyalty and obedience; the others descend from these (Arlacchi 1992). If the interest of the Mafia family is at stake, feelings toward relatives, friends take a back seat. There are implicit rules, that is, which will never be stated, but which are part of the mafioso's psychic heritage. The mafioso must show that he is never afraid (Falcone and Padovani., 1991). It is during the oath-taking ritual that the future man of honour is reminded of the rules of Cosa Nostra. Fundamental is that of obedience. During the rite of affiliation, however, the following rules are reminded: do not covet the woman of other men of honour; do not exploit prostitution; do not kill other men of honour, except in cases of absolute necessity; avoid denunciation to the police; do not get into conflict with other men of honour; always demonstrate serious and correct behaviour; maintain absolute silence with outsiders about Cosa Nostra; and never introduce oneself to other men of honour alone. The rule requires that another man of honour, known to those who are to make contact, vouch for their respective affiliation with Cosa Nostra by uttering the words: this man is the same. Another rule, finally, is to always tell the truth. When this does not happen, it means that the man of honour either does not respect his interlocutor or is himself not respected. In either case one of the two will have to die. In the Mafia organization the certainty of punishment is known. Every man of honour knows that if he violates the rules punishment is inevitable and that the punishment will be carried out. Punishment is applied in the same way both within the organization, in other words against the men of honour, and outside, in other words to the people who are the objects of Mafia blackmail, or even between competing Mafia families. On the external side, there is a gradualness of punishment that is inflicted on those who want to escape paying the "Pizzo" necessary to obtain Mafia protection. In these cases, the punishment initially has the function of a signal by which one communicates that one is serious, then in a continuous crescendo one arrives at the final punishment which consists in the killing of those who have been warned but did not understand the warning (Di Maria et al. 1989).

Most of the words, particularly the words Mafia and omertà, are symbolic words. The origin of the word Mafia comes from the Arabic "mu'afah," composed of the root mu' which means health, safety, vigour, strength, courage, and the verb "afah," which means to protect, safeguard, preserve hence the action noun mu'afah, which stands for man's ability to protect the helpless from the stronger. Omertà does not mean humility as it might seem at first glance, but omertà, the quality of being "omu" meaning serious, firm, strong. Omertà is a feeling all its own that consists of making oneself independent of social laws, of settling all disputes either by force, or, at most, by the arbitrariness of the most powerful representants. The foundation of omertà is silence. For the mafiosi, the word omertà indicates a reaction to passivity to the law, to social justice. This word reveals the bond that holds the members of the Mafia brotherhood together: one must know how to remain silent and resolve issues of honour internally, whoever speaks is a traitor. In this way, for mafiosi, the word omertà indicates man's ability to keep a secret, to keep it hidden from the law, from others, from representatives of paternal authority. The mafioso who does not abide by the code of silence is expelled from the association and must be killed. On the contrary, for the representatives of official society, for those who are not members of the Mafia, silence is a sign of cowardice: anyone who remains silent to social justice on the actions of the Mafia is considered an individual incapable of reacting; silence for non-Mafia members is an indication of passivity. Thus, the word silence also turns out to be a symbolic word and is characterized by projective ambiguity



(Di Maria et al. 1995). The words Mafia and silence still reveal the characteristics of symbolic words today, maintaining their original magical force even in the recent developments of Mafia associations. For each of these two words, two clusters of meanings can be distinguished, one of which groups together responses that indicate positive qualities and express the spirit of the Mafia, the other is made up of responses that indicate negative qualities and express the condemnation of the Mafia by justice social. The analysis of the language of the Mafia requires an exploratory procedure, a deciphering technique to reach the deep roots of the Mafia, the ghostly life of Mafia associations. The language of the Mafia, which allows communication between mafiosi, is a symbolic language, of a projective ambiguity and is understood intuitively and unconsciously internally, but must be deciphered by others, by non-mafiosi. This language is not made up only of words, on the contrary, in conversations between mafiosi the pauses, glances, gestures are rich in meaning; the agreement can be communicated to the other with a grimace, the pact with a hug which indicates not only the agreement, but also solidarity between the members of a society of brothers. Words, being symbolic words, are rich in meaning; a word can indicate various things, but it expresses the spirit of the Mafia and cannot be misunderstood by the mafiosi. The Mafia boss sometimes receives a nickname, which characterizes his personality. The mafiosi speak to each other in Sicilian dialect, nevertheless their language acquires characteristics for which it can be defined as the language of the Mafia, as it indicates the things, the secrets of the Mafia and by others, to be understood, it must be deciphered (Di Maria and Lavanco 1992).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the in-depth analysis conducted on the Mafia, examining both the historical and sociological aspects, has allowed us to shed light on a complex and constantly evolving criminal reality. The distinction between the old Mafia and the new Mafia highlighted significant changes in the criminal context, with new challenges and emerging dynamics. Through the in-depth study of Cosa Nostra, an intricate organizational structure emerged, characterized by precise objectives, well-defined roles, a consolidated recruitment system and stringent rules.

Understanding the objectives of Cosa Nostra provided a clear vision of the motivations underlying the criminal activities, while the analysis of the roles within the organization highlighted the complexity of the internal dynamics. The recruitment, described in detail, revealed the strategies used to increase one's power and influence the surrounding context.

The procedure to officially become a mafiosi appeared as an intricate and symbolic ritual, which underlines the secret and elite nature of this criminal organization.

The Cosa Nostra rules, emphasized throughout the analysis, highlighted rigorous compliance with the Mafia code and severe consequences for those who break it. Furthermore, Mafia language has proven to be a fundamental element in internal communication, helping to consolidate identity and cohesion within the organization.

In summary, the Mafia represents a complex phenomenon that goes beyond common crime, with deep historical roots and significant sociological implications. The in-depth study into the details of Cosa Nostra has allowed us to outline a complete picture of this criminal organization, highlighting its darkest and most intricate aspects. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective combating and prevention strategies, seeking to preserve the safety and integrity of society.

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