

# Chapter 2

## The Decline of the Italian Mafia

Letizia Paoli

### Introduction

In the Italian public debate, Italian mafia organisations, and particularly the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, are still routinely portrayed as immensely powerful and almost invincible. The few observers who express less pessimistic views are harshly criticised by antimafia prosecutors and activists alike and accused of having lost contact with local southern Italian reality or, even worse, of serving mafia interests.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, with varying degrees of good faith, most members of the law enforcement community, antimafia NGOs and academic and journalistic commentators insist upon the fact that after an unprecedented peak in the early 1990s antimafia fight has dramatically slowed down and weakened (cf. Bolzoni & Lodato, 1998; Lodato & Grasso, 2001).

Breaking a taboo, this contribution aims to document and explain the current crisis undergone by the two largest, longest-standing and most powerful forms of Italian organised crime, the Sicilian Cosa Nostra and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. As shown in the following pages, mafia groups' current decline is primarily the result of the intensification of law enforcement repression since the early 1990s. Contrary to popular perceptions, my analysis shows that *direct* antimafia policies,<sup>2</sup> which are anchored in

---

<sup>1</sup> Antimafia policies can be distinguished in direct and indirect, a distinction originally advanced by La Spina (2004). While the direct policies primarily consist in law-enforcement repression and sanctioning, the indirect ones address civil society and the public administration, ranging from anti-racket legislation to the dissolution of local councils infiltrated by the mafia and to initiatives aimed at spreading a "legality culture" and promote security in southern Italy. As shown elsewhere (La Spina, 2004, this volume; Paoli, 2007), indirect antimafia policies have been less effective than direct ones. Here it is also important to stress that the distinction between direct and indirect antimafia policies is analytic, because in practice there are many overlappings between them.

<sup>2</sup> Antimafia policies can be distinguished in direct and indirect, a distinction originally advanced by La Spina (2004). While the direct policies primarily consist in law-enforcement repression and sanctioning, the indirect ones address civil society and the public administration, ranging from anti-racket legislation to the dissolution of local councils infiltrated by the mafia and to initiatives aimed at spreading a "legality culture" and promote security in southern Italy. As shown elsewhere (La Spina, 2004, this volume; Paoli, 2007), indirect antimafia policies have been less effective than direct ones. Here it is also important to stress that the distinction between direct and indirect antimafia policies is analytic, because in practice there are many overlappings between them.

criminal and criminal procedural law and primarily implemented by the criminal justice system, have continued to be quite effective at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As we will see in the following pages, such a conclusion is based on the analysis of a plurality of quantitative and qualitative data, including the number of *mafiosi* arrested and convicted, the amount of assets seized and confiscated, mafia-related murders and qualitative evidence resulting from law enforcement investigations, mafia defectors' statements and short letters (the so-called *pizzini*, see *infra*) written by high-ranking bosses of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra.

Though accelerated by law enforcement action, mafia organisations' decline has also been fostered by contradictions and shortcomings in their own legitimisation system. Cultural norms have in fact braked mafia groups' expansion outside of their home regions and the diversification of their illicit activities. As a result of both law enforcement and culture, southern Italian mafia organisations, with the partial exception of some 'Ndrangheta families, are now excluded from large-scale international flows of illegal trade and have receded into their own territories, focusing instead on racketeering in their local communities. Particularly in northern and central Italy, they have lost terrain to a myriad of new criminal enterprises that are much more ephemeral and often composed of foreign migrants (cf. Paoli, 2004, 2007 for an analysis of Italy's non-mafia forms of organised crime).

In the first section I discuss the main characteristics of the two largest and most powerful mafia organisations; the Sicilian Cosa Nostra and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta, emphasizing their peculiarities vis-à-vis other forms of European organised crime. In the latter part of that section, I also show how cultural codes effectively restrain mafia groups' economic activities. In the second section I briefly recall the intensification of the antimafia fight since 1992 and then examine how these two organisations have reacted to it. Some concluding remarks follow.

## **Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta: What Makes Them Different from Most Other Forms of Organised Crime?**

Contrary to what most scholars maintained up to the early 1980s, judicial inquiries carried out since then have demonstrated that formalised mafia groups do exist. Cosa Nostra (Our Thing) and the 'Ndrangheta (Society of the Men of Honour) are the two largest and most stable criminal organisations and are each composed of about a hundred mafia groups.<sup>3</sup> Though it is not possible to establish clear lines

---

<sup>3</sup>Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta do not exhaust the panorama of organised crime even in their home regions. In Sicily and northern Calabria several other mafia and pseudo-mafia groups are active and in Sicily some of them have even successfully challenged the local Cosa Nostra families. In addition to the Sicilian and Calabrian groups, two other clusters of crime groups are usually referred to as organised crime in Italy: (1) the "galaxy" of mafia-like and gangster-like groupings in Campania, collectively known as "camorra" and (2) the multiplicity of criminal groups, gangs and white-collar criminal networks operating in Apulia. Other non-traditional organised crime groups and networks, partially composed by foreign migrants, are also active since the early 1990s, primarily in the Centre-North (for more information, see Paoli, 2004, 2007).

of continuity, historical research since the late 1980s has demonstrated that antecedents of the contemporary mafia groups existed in the 1880s, if not before (cf. Pezzino, 1987). In the mid-1990s the members of Cosa Nostra and the ‘Ndrangheta were estimated at about 3,500 and 5,000 males, respectively (Paoli, 2003: 30–32). No newer estimates have been published since then.

### *Secret Brotherhoods*

Cosa Nostra and the ‘Ndrangheta possess the distinguishing trait of organisations (Weber [1922] 1978: 48): independent government bodies that regulate the internal life of each associated family and that are clearly different from the authority structure of their members’ biological families. Starting from the 1950s, moreover, super-ordinate bodies of coordination were set up – first in the Cosa Nostra, then, since the early 1990s, in the ‘Ndrangheta as well. Composed of the most important family chiefs, they are known as “commissions.” Despite the media and judicial emphasis on them, the powers of these collegial bodies have always been quite limited, as their primary and almost exclusive task has been the regulation of violence against mafia members and public officials.

Neither the Cosa Nostra nor the ‘Ndrangheta can be assimilated to Max Weber’s ideal type of legal-rational bureaucracy, as was suggested by Donald Cressey (1969) in the late 1960s with reference to the American La Cosa Nostra. Far from recruiting their staff and organising the latter’s work according to the criteria and procedures of modern bureaucracies, mafia groups impose a veritable “status contract” on their members (Weber, 1978: 672). With the ritual initiation into a mafia group, the novice is required to assume a new identity permanently – to become a “man of honour” – and to subordinate all his previous allegiances to the mafia membership. If necessary, he must be ready to sacrifice even his life for the mafia family.

The “men of honour” in Sicily and Calabria are obliged to keep secret the composition, the action, and the strategies of their mafia group. In Cosa Nostra, in particular, the duty of silence is absolute. Secrecy constitutes, above all, a defence strategy. Since the unification of Italy in 1861 mafia groups have been at least formally criminalised by the state and, in order to protect themselves from arrest and criminal prosecution for their continuing recourse to violence, they have needed to resort to varying degrees of secrecy.

The ceremony of affiliation additionally creates ritual ties of brotherhood among the members of a mafia family: the “status contract” is also an act of fraternisation (Weber, 1978: 672). The new recruits become “brothers” to all members and share what anthropologists call a “regime of generalised reciprocity”: this presupposes altruistic behaviour without expecting any short-term reward. As Lestingi (1884), chief prosecutor for the monarchy, pointed out in 1884, mafia groups constitute brotherhoods whose “essential character” lies in “mutual aid without limits and without measure, and even in crimes” (Lestingi, 1884: 453).

As secret brotherhoods using violence, southern Italian mafia confederations have remarkable similarities to organisations such as the Chinese Triads and the

Japanese Yakuza. With their centuries-old histories, articulated structures, and sophisticated ritual and symbolic apparatuses, all these organisations – and the American descendant of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra – have few parallels in the world of organised crime. None of the other groups that systematically traffic in illegal commodities have the same degree of complexity and longevity (Paoli, 2002b).

### *The Will to Power*

Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta share another important peculiarity with the Chinese Triads and the Japanese Yakuza. Unlike other contemporary organised crime groups, they do not content themselves with producing and selling illegal goods and services. Though these activities have acquired an increasing relevance over the past 30 years, neither the trade in illegal commodities nor the maximisation of profits has ever been the primary goal of these organisations. As a matter of fact, at least in the case of southern Italian mafia coalitions, it is hardly possible to identify a single goal. The Sicilian Cosa Nostra and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta are multi-functional organisations. In the past 100 years, their members have exploited the strength of mafia bonds to pursue various endeavours and to accomplish the most disparate tasks. Already in 1876 the Tuscan aristocrat Leopoldo Franchetti ([1876] 1993: 100) pointed out the “extraordinary elasticity” of the Sicilian associations of *malfattori* (evildoers): “the goals multiply, the field of action widens, without the need to multiply the statutes; the association divides for certain goals, remains united for others.”

Among these tasks the exercise of political domination has always been pre-eminent. The ruling bodies of Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta claim, above all, an absolute power over their members. They control every aspect of their members' lives, and they aim to exercise a similar power over the communities where their members reside. For a long time their power had a higher degree of effectiveness and legitimacy than that exercised by the state. In western Sicily and in southern Calabria mafia groups successfully policed the general population, settling conflicts, recovering stolen goods, and enforcing property rights.

Even today, although most mafia rules are no longer systematically enforced, mafia families exercise a certain “sovereignty” through a generalised system of extortion. As a state would do, they tax the main productive activities carried out within their territory (Paoli, 2003: 154–172). Moreover, whenever *mafiosi* are asked to mediate conflicts, guarantee property rights and enforce rules compatible with their own legal order, they do not hesitate to intervene. Even contemporary “men of honour” still take these duties seriously (cf. Lodato, 1999: 73).

The political dimension of mafia power is also proven by the fact that in the second half of the twentieth century southern Italy's mafia organisations have participated in at least three plots organised by right-wing terrorist groups. Moreover, since the late 1970s, Cosa Nostra has assassinated dozens of policemen, magistrates, and politicians. The mafia challenge to state power reached a climax

in the early 1990s. In 1992, Cosa Nostra murdered the Palermitan judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in two spectacular bomb explosions. In 1993, in an effort to demonstrate the national power of the mafia, a series of terrorist bombings occurred – for the first time out of traditional mafia strongholds – in Rome, Florence, and Milan.

### *The Incomplete Entrepreneurial Transformation*

Despite their power, Cosa Nostra and the ‘Ndrangheta have been unable to guarantee themselves a monopoly in any sector of the illegal economy outside southern Italy. In the early 1980s, Cosa Nostra families played a pivotal role in the transcontinental heroin trade from Asia to the United States via Sicily. But in the second half of that decade, they lost this position after being targeted by law-enforcement investigations and replaced in the U.S. market by a plethora of Mexican, Chinese, and, more recently, Colombian heroin suppliers (Paoli, 2003: 215–216).

The power of Cosa Nostra is not unchallenged even within its strongholds. Given the extreme rigidity of their recruitment policies, in fact, Cosa Nostra families often find themselves in a minority position and are hence unable to control the whole underworld. This difficulty was admitted to even by Giovanni Brusca, the man who was supposed to become Totò Riina’s successor in Cosa Nostra leadership, but who in fact became a mafia witness after his arrest in 1994:

Many believe that Cosa Nostra heads all criminal activities. That in Palermo or in Sicily every illegal activity is controlled by the *mafiosi*. People believe that prostitution and burglaries, bank robberies, and car thefts are all entries in the budget of the Mafia Inc. Those that I have just listed are external activities, known about, tolerated, and controlled by men of honour. But they are separate worlds, which only rarely come into contact with each other. In some cases, there might be some collaboration, but this is only in very special cases (Lodato, 1999: 67).

Despite the growing relevance of economic activities, “the mafia has not become a set of criminal *enterprises*” (Becchi & Turvani, 1993: 156). Its history as well as its cultural and normative apparatus prevent this transformation and today constitute a constraint as much as a resource. By building a strong collective identity, shared cultural codes and norms enhance group cohesion and create trustful relationships among mafia members. The reliance on status and fraternisation contracts, which are non-specific and long-term, produces a high degree of flexibility and makes the multi-functionality of mafia groups possible. The same shared cultural codes and norms also represent a powerful brake on entrepreneurial initiative. The prohibition on exploiting prostitution, for example, which exists in both confederations, has blocked the entrance of the Cosa Nostra and ‘Ndrangheta groups into what has become one of the most profitable illicit trades: the smuggling of humans and the exploitation of migrants in the sex industry.

Especially constraining is one of the preconditions for recruitment: only men born either in Sicily or in Calabria or descending from mafia families can be

admitted as members. This rule has long prevented Cosa Nostra and ‘Ndrangheta families from adding new members with the experience necessary to compete in the black markets for arms, money, and gold. Rigid recruitment criteria have also hampered the geographical expansion of mafia power. Cosa Nostra, for example, prohibits settling families outside of Sicily and the only partial exception to this rule has been represented by the Cuntrera-Caruana family from Siculiana. This self-imposed rule, which aims to strengthen the cohesion of the mafia consortium, has limited its involvement in the international narcotics trade – currently the largest of the illegal markets. ‘Ndrangheta families, thanks to their extensive branches in northern Italy and abroad, played a larger role in narcotics trafficking in the 1990s, importing large quantities of cocaine and hashish from Latin America and North Africa. Today, however, the ‘Ndrangheta faces new competition from foreign and Italian traffickers with more direct connections to drug-producing and transit countries (Paoli, 2003: 217).

The “will to power” of the mafia organisations also negatively affects security and business decisions, as a leading Palermitan prosecutor pointed out in 1992:

The true goal is power. The obscure evil of organisation chiefs is not the thirst for money, but the thirst for power. The most important fugitives could enjoy a luxurious life abroad until the end of their days. Instead they remain in Palermo, hunted, in danger of being caught or being killed by internal dissidents, in order to prevent the loss of their territorial control and not run the risk of being deposed (Scarpinato, 1992: 45).

As a result, since the early 1990s Cosa Nostra and ‘Ndrangheta families have extracted a growing percentage of their income from entrepreneurial activities that depend on the exercise of regional political domination. They practice systematic extortion in their communities and, thanks to intimidation and collusion with corrupt politicians, they have struggled to control the market for public works. Their interest originally focused on the construction market: from the 1950s onwards, Cosa Nostra groups, and later on ‘Ndrangheta families as well, set up their own building companies and pressed claims to become directly involved in both small and large building sites. Since the 1980s, moreover, mafia enterprises of both regions have become eager to obtain a share of any public work tendered by national or local public administrations.

In addition to the spread of mafia interests, the novelty of the 1980s and early 1990s was represented by the involvement of mafia representatives in the *comitati d'affari*, originally formed from politicians and entrepreneurs, which had controlled the bidding processes of large-scale public works all over the country for many years. Thus mafia influence no longer took place only “downstream,” i.e., at the end of the economic process of public investment (subcontracts and extortions). It was also exercised “upstream” at the beginning of the process, with decisions made jointly by mafia representatives, state agencies and the large building companies that were particularly interested in obtaining large contracts for public works. In western Sicily, for example, a sort of “duopoly” was established in the late 1980s and early 1990s: the public works market was subject to the complete “top-down” control of two strong groups – Cosa Nostra and the *comitati d'affari* – which had

joined forces in a kind of symbiosis cemented by silence and complicity (Paoli, 2003: 147–148, 174–175).

Unlike other western forms of organised crime, the meaning (and danger) of the two main Sicilian and Calabrian mafia organisations cannot be limited to their involvement in illegal markets. Their peculiarity lies in their will to exercise political power and their interest in exercising sovereign control over the people in their communities.

## **Law-Enforcement Repression and Mafia Organisations' Reactions**

Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta's economic activities, political relationships and even their overall associational life have been seriously hit by the intensification of law enforcement action that followed the "terrorist" attacks staged by Cosa Nostra in 1992–1993. The attacks against Cosa Nostra were particularly devastating, as allegedly recognised even by Bernardo Provenzano, the latest known "*capo*," or chief of the Sicilian mafia organisation, who was captured in April 2006. According to an informant, in fact, in the second half of the 1990s, Provenzano said that he was convinced that Cosa Nostra would need at least 5–7 years to recover from the serious crisis into which it had plunged and to improve its economic situation, which was at that point precarious (Ministero dell'Interno, 2001b: 10).

### ***The State Counterattacks After 2002***

Provenzano's arrest in 2006 crowned the intensified law enforcement efforts to capture all the leading Cosa Nostra figures of the 1980s and 1990s, some of whom had been on the run for decades. The first outcome of such an effort and a major boost for the whole antimafia campaign had been the arrest in January 2003 of Totò Riina, Provenzano's predecessor at the head of Cosa Nostra, after more than 22 years spent in hiding. Between these two spectacular arrests, hundreds of less-known mafia members were also arrested and tried. The Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA, 2007) reports that in the period 1992–June 2006 it allowed prosecutor's offices to issue 1,627 arrest warrants against members of Sicilian mafia groups and 2,317 against members of the Calabrian mafia. These data do not of course represent the total number of arrested persons. Another partial source is the Ministry of the Interior, which reports the data concerning the dangerous fugitives arrested, most of whom are mafia bosses or at least mafia members. As Table 2.1 shows, between 1992 and June 2005 over 1,200 fugitives were arrested, who belonged to either Sicilian or Calabrian mafia groups.

Neither the DIA nor the Ministry of the Interior distinguish between members of Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta families and members of other mafia or pseudo-mafia



**Table 2.1** Arrested fugitives belonging to Calabrian or Sicilian mafia groups – 1992–2005

	Calabrian mafia groups	Sicilian mafia groups
1992	29	12
1993	47	69
1994	34	71
1995	59	90
1996	66	56
1997	34	39
1998	86	80
1999	53	50
2000	43	38
2001	44	25
2002	38	25
2003	22	26
2004	30	18
2005 (6 months)	16	5
Total	601	604

*Source:* For 1992–1997, Ministero dell’Interno (2001a: 438); for 1997–2005, Ministero dell’Interno (2005: 26–27)

crime groups active in Sicily. However, there are no doubts that the former account for the bulk of mafia-type organised crime active in the two regions and they are prioritised by law enforcement agencies. Given the previous estimates of 3,500 and 5,000 males respectively composing Cosa Nostra and the ‘Ndrangheta, it is clear that the probability of being arrested has become very high.

Members of Cosa Nostra and ‘Ndrangheta are not only arrested but also charged and convicted with heavy sentences. Even in Calabria, where state repression has until recently not received much support from civil society, mafia groups have experienced severe restrictions. In January 1999, at the end of the hearings concerning the Olimpia-1 Operation, the Reggio Calabria court handed down 62 life sentences and 141 sentences amounting to over 1,380 years of imprisonment, while another three hundred defendants are involved in the three following parts of the inquiry. Likewise, the 99 defendants of the Tirreno maxi-trial, which took place in Palmi against the greatly feared Piromalli and Molè families, were sentenced to 89 life sentences and 731 years of imprisonment by the local first-degree court. The investigations did not focus only on the core families of the province of Reggio Calabria, but also involved their links in central and northern Italy. In Milan, for example, between 1994 and 1998 more than a thousand members of the ‘Ndrangheta faced trial in about twenty maxi-trials, all of which ended with convictions and heavy sentences (Paoli, 2003: 214).

Although they do not provide regional specification, the data of the Department of Penitentiary Administration confirm that the risk of spending a long time in jail has become real for *mafiosi*. On December 2005, for example, a total of 5,684 persons were serving sentences for the crime of mafia association foreseen by Article 416*bis* of the Italian Criminal Code, including 5,514 male Italians, 45 female



Italians, 177 male foreigners and 8 female foreigners (Ministero della Giustizia, 2006). Of those, 672 *mafiosi* were held under the special incarceration regime (Art. 41*bis* of the penitentiary law) as of the end of December 2002. The imprisoned chiefs were so discouraged that in early 2001 some of them allegedly proposed a deal to the state institutions: they would confess to their own crimes, without involving other mafia members, in exchange for a reduction in their convictions and the abolition of the special detention system.

The financial drain on the two organisations has been especially heavy. During the Olimpia-1 trial, for example, the Reggio Calabria court seized properties worth almost €80 million and confiscated goods worth over €20 billion definitively (*Gazzetta del Sud* January 20, 1999; see Paoli, 2003: 215). According to the prefect of Reggio Calabria, assets worth €700 million were seized in the province during the 1990s (CPM, 2000: 51). The DIA alone claims to have seized assets worth over €1 billion from Sicilian mafia groups. Whereas the precision of these estimates may be questioned,<sup>4</sup> qualitative evidence confirms the overall impact. Indeed, some mafia families now seem to be virtually bankrupt as a result of seizures and sentences. According to several law enforcement investigators, during the second half of the 1990s many mafia groups, both in Palermo and in Reggio Calabria, stopped paying the monthly salary to the families of the convicted “men of honour,” thus ending one of the most important principles of the mafia legal order because they no longer have liquidity (DIA, 2007: 58).

The new investigations were frequently promoted by confessions from former mafia members, dozens of whom decided to become state witnesses after the early 1990s. At its peak, in late 1996, more than 1,200 former members of criminal groups were under the state protection programme. About 35% of them formed part of Sicilian crime coalitions. The percentage of *pentiti* coming from the ranks of Calabrian mafia and pseudo-mafia groups, which rely more than Cosa Nostra on family blood ties, was instead more modest (13%) (Ministero dell’Interno, 1997). The sudden rise in the number of mafia witnesses was made possible by the adoption of legislation granting them sanctioning and penitentiary benefits and establishing a state protection programme in 1991. However, the sudden rise in their number also reflects the crisis of the mafia legitimisation system following the modernisation of southern Italy and the partial “entrepreneurial transformation” of mafia groups, which was aggravated by Cosa Nostra’s more and more indiscriminate use of violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Paoli, 2003: 94–98).

Mafia witness confessions and statements allowed not only investigations and arrests but also inquiries into what is sometimes inappropriately called the “third level”: namely the political and judicial protection mafia groups enjoyed for decades.

---

<sup>4</sup>The value of seized assets is estimated in a rough and approximate way by the local police sections at the moment of seizure. A careful evaluation of the asset value is carried out only when the confiscation decision is final and the assets have to be incorporated into the state property or sold by auction (see Paoli, 2002a).

The three most sensational investigations and trials begun in the early 1990s – namely, the two involving Giulio Andreotti,<sup>5</sup> accused in Palermo of belonging to a mafia-type delinquent association and in Perugia of having ordered the murder of journalist Mino Pecorelli in 1979, and the trial against Corrado Carnevale, the former head of the first section of the Corte di Cassazione – largely backfired, as the two defendants were finally acquitted of all charges. Andreotti's acquittal, however, was not stainless. The Palermitan judges in fact pointed out that Andreotti, together with some Sicilian Christian Democrats, had close relationships with Cosa Nostra before 1980, though they applied the statute of limitations for that period. Moreover, with less media outcry, several other politicians have been brought to trial accused of favouring mafia groups and some of them have been convicted — among them, Marcello Dell'Utri, Silvio Berlusconi's former right hand, who was convicted by a first-degree Palermitan court for his support for Cosa Nostra.

### ***Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta's Reactions and Current Conditions***

Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta have responded in several ways to escape law enforcement action or at least to minimise its impact. For Cosa Nostra this has meant a reversal of the open challenge to state sovereignty pursued in the early 1990s. The radical change of strategy has not been accompanied, however, by a significant change of leadership: Bernardo Provenzano who used to be Cosa Nostra's undisputed leader until his arrest in 2006, was Totò Riina's right hand in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The first goal of both organisations' reforming efforts has been to become as invisible and impermeable to law enforcement agencies as possible. In line with this objective, except for the anomalous murder of the vice-president of the Calabrian regional assembly, Francesco Fortugno in October 2004, no murders of civil servants or terrorist attacks have been authorised. Within Cosa Nostra, rigid procedures have also been established to authorise the murder by "men of honour" of other mafia members or petty criminals. This new policy has had tangible results, as Table 2.2 reveals. Since the early 1990s there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of murders, and specifically organised crime-related murders, recorded in Sicily and Calabria. In 2003 mafia murders committed in Sicily were one twenty-fifth of those recorded in the peak year of 1991, while in Calabria they fell to one sixth.

Allegedly, Provenzano has also asked his mafia brothers to focus on entrepreneurial activities that do not raise much social alarm, such as extortions, usury, manipulation of public tenders and, to the extent possible, drug trafficking. Changes are also recorded in the very organisation of extortions. According to the DIA, all producers,

---

<sup>5</sup> Giulio Andreotti is one of the most important politicians in the post-war period: he has been a member of parliament since 1948, prime minister seven times, and a government minister countless times.

**Table 2.2** Murders and organised crime-related murders reported in Calabria and Sicily

	Calabria		Sicily	
	Murders	Org. crime murders	Murders	Org. crime murders
1990	326	141	428	150
1991	277	165	481	253
1992	151	46	399	200
1993	126	43	252	85
1994	121	42	249	90
1995	95	24	223	88
1996	103	30	180	66
1997	100	32	131	34
1998	85	28	140	35
1999	82	26	116	28
2000	84	34	86	13
2001	88	28	82	20
2002	61	17	70	11
2003	69	26	61	10

Source: ISTAT, *Annuario Statistiche Giudiziarie Penali*, several years

and not just the big companies as in the past, are now asked to pay a contribution to Cosa Nostra, but contributions are kept low to prevent popular resentment from reaching critical dimensions (Ministero dell'Interno, 2006: 20–21).

To ensure cohesion and reduce the number of potential defectors, Provenzano, according to the DIA, also envisaged and implemented a fully-fledged plan with three main pillars:

- Returning to Cosa Nostra's traditional rules, which had in the past allowed the organisation to operate inconspicuously
- Drastically reducing the number of "men of honour," forming in fact a criminal elite set apart from "manpower," to create some layers of protection around "men of honour" and thus protect them from possible defectors among low-ranking staff
- Raising the cultural standard of Cosa Nostra leaders and members, by recruiting candidates with high educational standards and a good social position (Ministero dell'Interno, 2000)

To protect himself from possible defections, Provenzano also relied on a small number of trusted *mafiosi*, who were entrusted with responsibilities over and above the traditional organisations in families and districts (the so-called *mandamenti*) (Ministero dell'Interno, 2001b). According to several sources, even the Palermitan provincial commission (undoubtedly Cosa Nostra's most consolidated collegial body) has not held full meetings since 1994. Up until his arrest, Provenzano used to communicate primarily with his trusted lieutenants via so-called *pizzini*, i.e., short, hand-written or typed letters that were delivered back and forth by chains of trusted postmen. Ironically, this communication system, which had been dictated by security reasons, has now turned into an unexpected and very rich source of information and evidence against high-ranking Cosa Nostra members.

The *pizzini* themselves, as well as the numerous wiretappings of conversations among *mafiosi*, also attest to the economic and political decline of Cosa Nostra. While international drug trafficking continues to be an important activity for some 'Ndrangheta families, particularly those of the Ionian coast, Cosa Nostra groups are by now largely marginalised.

To illustrate how Cosa Nostra's role in drug trafficking has changed," the DIA wrote in one of its bi-annual reports, "it is enough to point out that the Bagheria family, which once had a prominent role in heroin trafficking towards the United States, has now turned to supplying a dealers' network in Palermo (Ministero dell'Interno, 2000: 11).

Extortions currently represent the primary and most stable source of revenue for most Cosa Nostra families. Thus, far from profiting from Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta's entrepreneurial difficulties, people and companies in high-density mafia districts are today exploited by the *mafiosi* more than ever, as they are called to make up for the failed earnings from drugs or other illegal trades.

All of the units of the two mafia confederations place their hopes for economic recovery in gaining public contracts, which began to be distributed from 2000, after the sharp drop, especially in the South, following the Tangentopoli (Bribesville) inquiries. Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta families have been particularly eager to intercept part of the considerable sums from the EU funds of Agenda 2000: approximately €9,000 and €5,000 million, respectively, were invested between 2000 and 2006 in Sicily and Calabria. However, the extent to which the mafia groups have been able to achieve their objectives is unclear. A co-ordination committee for the supervision of major public works, composed of representatives of law enforcement agencies and several national Ministries, began to operate in 2003 and has so far failed to find evidence of large-scale mafia infiltration in major infrastructural investments. Indeed, even Provenzano's *pizzini* seem to prove Cosa Nostra's current inability to influence the allocation of large-scale projects in contrast to predominant and more successful involvement in more local and limited tenders (Loi, 2006).

Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta families still enjoy a local network of trusted politicians, most of whom are members of the Unione dei Democratici Cristiani (UDC) or Forza Italia: it suffices to mention that Salvatore Cuffaro (UDC), the President of the Region of Sicily, is currently under trial for abetting Cosa Nostra. During the 5 years of Berlusconi's second and third cabinet (2001–2006), mafia bosses had also hoped that the many southern Italian lawyers who routinely represented *mafiosi* and had been elected to Parliament in the ranks of the government coalition would reform current antimafia policies. However, their hopes were largely frustrated, despite the not-so-veiled threats from imprisoned bosses. As Francesco Messina Denaro summed up in a *pizzino* to Provenzano, "we have been hit hard... if they [the law enforcement agencies] go on so, they will not only arrest all of us but even our chairs" (Cordella, 2006: 7). Messina Denaro went on asking Provenzano for political help, but he then added himself: "they [the politicians] do not do anything for nothing. And at the moment, we do not have much leverage over them" (Cordella, 2006: 7).

## Concluding Remarks

The radical and painful changes undergone by the two principal sets of organised crime in southern Italy are the best proof of the effectiveness of antimafia law enforcement action. Cosa Nostra has seen all of its high-ranking members of the 1980s and 1990s arrested, has been excluded from most international trafficking and has lost political power nationally. The 'Ndrangheta is in a slightly better condition but many of its families, too, have been decimated by arrests, convictions and asset confiscations. However, the capacity of mafia groups to survive and regenerate should not be underestimated: Cosa Nostra, in particular, re-emerged strengthened from the two previous waves of sharp repression in the 1920s–early 1930s and during the 1960s. Recognising mafia groups' current crisis does not mean that they are defeated or that the law enforcement campaign against the mafia should be relaxed.

A brief look at the socio-economic context explains why a recovery cannot be ruled out. Mafia groups keep on finding a fertile breeding ground in the chronic underdevelopment and inefficient public government of some parts of southern Italy, which are usually worse where mafia and organised crime are the strongest. As far as underdevelopment is concerned, it suffices to say that for much of the past decade the unemployment rate in Calabria and some Sicilian provinces, such as Catania, Palermo and Enna, has oscillated between 28% and 35% and in 2005 was still as high as 18.6 for the whole Mezzogiorno (Svimez, 2006). Youth unemployment is even more dramatic. In Calabria, for example, youth unemployment (i.e., among 15–25 year olds) was as high as 66% in 1999, with a peak of 71% in the province of Reggio Calabria (CPM, 2000). Given these conditions, a career in the mafia or crime still looks attractive to many youngsters with poor education and few hopes of finding a job in the legal economy, and who thus provide an inexhaustible reserve army of criminal manpower. Much for Southern Italy is also poorly and ineffectively governed by plethora of local politicians and civil servants willing to spread resources to friends and patrons in order to buy consensus. Even when these state representatives are not directly linked to the mafia, they end up perpetuating old clientelistic logics in which mafia groups can hide and flourish. Despite the recent law enforcement successes in the fight against the mafia, therefore, the road ahead is still a long one and it would be a terrible mistake to claim premature victory.

## References

- Becchi, A., & Turvani, M. (1993). *Proibito? Il mercato mondiale della droga*. Rome: Donzelli.
- Bolzoni, A., & Lodato, S. (1998). *C'era una volta la lotta alla mafia*. Milan: Garzanti.
- Cordella, S. (2006). Matteo Messina Denaro: il re di Trapani. *Antimafia Duemila*, 6(3), 7–10.
- CPM (Commissione Parlamentare d'inchiesta sul fenomeno della mafia e sulle altre associazioni similari). (2000). *Relazione sullo stato della lotta alla criminalità organizzata in Calabria*, doc. XXIII, no. 42, XIII Legislature. Rome: Camera dei Deputati.

- Cressey, D. (1969). *Theft of the Nation*. New York: Harper and Row.
- DIA (Direzione Investigativa Antimafia). (2007). *Rilevazioni statistiche*. Accessed January 2007. <[http://www.interno.it/dip\\_ps/dia/pagine/rilevazioni\\_stat.htm](http://www.interno.it/dip_ps/dia/pagine/rilevazioni_stat.htm)>.
- Franchetti, L. ([1876] 1993). *Condizioni politiche ed amministrative della Sicilia*. Reprint, Rome: Donzelli.
- La Spina, A. (2004). The paradox of effectiveness: Growth, institutionalisation and evaluation of anti-mafia policies in Italy. In C. Fijnaut & L. Paoli (Eds.), *Organised crime in Europe: Concepts, patterns and policies in the European Union and beyond* (pp. 641–676). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Lestingi, F. (1884). L'associazione della Fratellanza nella provincia di Girgenti. *Archivio di psichiatria, antropologia criminale e scienze penali*, 5, 452–463.
- Lodato, S. (1999). *Ho ucciso Giovanni Falcone. La confessione di Giovanni Brusca*. Milan: Mondadori.
- Lodato, S. & Grasso, P. (2001). *La mafia invisibile. La nuova strategia di Cosa Nostra*. Milan: Mondadori.
- Loi, M. (2006). In carcere il Gotha di Cosa Nostra: I pizzini di Provenzano svelano i nuovi capi. *Antimafia Duemila*, 6(3), 2–6.
- Ministero dell'Interno. (1997). *Relazione sui programmi di protezione, sulla loro efficacia e sulle modalità generali di applicazione per coloro che collaborano alla giustizia – II semestre 1996*.
- Ministero dell'Interno. (2000). *Relazione semestrale sull'attività svolta e i risultati conseguiti dalla Direzione Investigativa Antimafia nel secondo semestre del 1999*.
- Ministero dell'Interno. (2001a). *Rapporto sullo stato della sicurezza in Italia 2001*.
- Ministero dell'Interno. (2001b). *Relazione semestrale sull'attività svolta e i risultati conseguiti dalla Direzione Investigativa Antimafia nel secondo semestre del 2000*.
- Ministero dell'Interno. (2005). *Rapporto sullo stato della sicurezza in Italia 2005*.
- Ministero dell'Interno. (2006). *Relazione semestrale sull'attività svolta e i risultati conseguiti dalla Direzione Investigativa Antimafia nel secondo semestre del 2005*.
- Ministero della Giustizia, Dipartimento dell'Amministrazione Penitenziaria. (2006). *Rapporto sulla situazione degli istituti penitenziari per l'anno 2005*.
- Paoli, L. (2002a). Italian. In M. Kilchling (Ed.), *Die Praxis der Gewinnabschöpfung in Europa* (pp. 239–295). Freiburg: Edition iuscrim.
- Paoli, L. (2002b). The paradoxes of organised crime. *Crime, law and social change*, 37(1), 51–97.
- Paoli, L. (2003). *Mafia brotherhoods: Organized crime, Italian style*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Paoli, L. (2004). Organised crime in Italy: Mafia and illegal markets – Exception and normality. In C. Fijnaut & L. Paoli (Eds.), *Organised crime in Europe: Concepts, patterns and policies in the European Union and beyond* (pp. 263–302). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Pezzino, P. (1987). Stato violenza società. Nascita e sviluppo del paradigma mafioso. In M. Aymard & G. Giarrizzo (Eds.), *La Sicilia* (pp. 905–984). Turin: Einaudi.
- Scarpinato, R. (1992). 'Mafia e politica' in *Mafia. Anatomia di un regime*. Rome, Librerie Associate.
- Svimez. (2006). *Rapporto 2006 sull'economia del Mezzogiorno – Sintesi*, 11 July 2006.
- Weber, M. ([1922] 1978). In G. Roth & C. Wittich (Eds.), *Economy and society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.