

# A qualitative reading of the ecological (dis)organisation of criminal associations. The case of the ‘Famiglia Basilischi’ in Italy

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**Abstract** This paper combines the theoretical foundations of organisational ecology - one of the most important approaches in economic sociology - with classic criminological theories to interpret the birth, evolution and death of criminal associations. This mixed approach will support the interpretation of organised crime groups as phenomena strictly linked to the environment as well as to other competitors in criminal markets. This paper analyses the birth, evolution and death of a criminal association in Basilicata, Southern Italy, known as the ‘Famiglia Basilischi’. The case is exemplary of how ecological conditions affect the success or failure of a newly formed criminal association. These conditions can therefore be indicators to interpret organised criminal activities in similar environments.

**Keywords** Organised crime · Mafia · Organisational ecology · Differential association · Social disorganisation · Criminal organisations

## Background and introduction

Organised crime as a social phenomenon can be understood through the study of either criminal associations and networks or criminal activities and their enabling factors (Obokata 2010; Paoli and Fijnaut 2006). The network analysis of criminal associations is not only one of the most discussed topics in organised crime studies (Kenney 2007), but it is also a topic that has interested organisational studies (Catino 2014) as well as economics and social sciences at large. While, on one side, the literature on the subject is vast and therefore difficult to summarise, on the other side, such richness in studies allows having a much greater selection in approaches and sophistication of thought.

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The way criminal associations organise their activities will necessarily depend on, and interact with, the environment in which they operate as well as the characters and the personalities of the individuals involved, within and outside the group.

In classic criminological studies, ecological perspectives on crime attempt to understand the relationships between culture, behaviours, deviance and control strategies. For organised crime and criminal organisations - because the crimes involved are often serious and often requiring various degrees of organisation - the study of the environment includes considerations of the criminal market of interest and on the players in that market in a given area. In this perspective, ecological studies in criminology meet organisational studies and in particular organisational ecology, as evolutionary socio-economic theory. The main purpose of this paper is indeed to enrich criminological perspectives on criminal associations through a qualitative use of the framework of organisational ecology. This is a study on evolution of criminal groups in a competitive criminogenic environment.

Organisational ecology is one of the most important approaches in economic sociology and is concerned with competition among organisations in relation to market foundation (Hannan and Freeman 1989; Hannan and Freeman 1977). The object of the inquiry in organisation ecology is the organisational field and the system organisations create through their interactions rather than focusing on the single organisation and its organisation-set (Trist 1977). Moreover, this theory is also concerned with ‘non-market’ influences – legal, institutional elements – although these do not constitute the core of its interest (Beck 2008).

Organisational ecology has been largely employed to investigate the sociology of markets as it is based on the argument that organisations develop on the basis of a selection process resulting from the survival of the best fit within given environmental conditions (Baum et al. 2006; Baum and Amburgey 2002). However, this exercise has been criticised because of its ‘Darwinian’ origin and its comparison of organisational entities to biological species (Beck 2008). Indeed, (biological) evolution cannot be considered the core of the fate of organisations in the market, which is instead, still determined by more or less rational actors (Hannan and Freeman 1989).

Following the line of work done at the sociological level by Beck (2008), this paper reads organisational ecology as an evolution theory that can apply not only to legitimate markets but also in criminal settings. Moreover, studies that have looked at the position of terrorist groups in their respective markets, use organisational ecology to explain failure of new groups against more established ones (Young and Dugan 2014). Indeed, terrorism studies have used the insights of organisations ecology to assess vulnerability of strategies and decision-making of newer groups against more established ones (Shapiro 2012).

By extracting some of the theoretical foundations of organisational ecology and by applying them to a specific case study of a criminal association born and ‘dead’ in Italy – this paper explores the contribution of organisational ecology in criminological studies. The relevance of this work lies in the combination of criminology with socio-economic paradigms. Indeed, as organised crime groups are often found to interact also in legal markets, it is useful to look at organised crime through the lenses of organisational studies with reference to legal markets. Even though every market (legal and illegal) presents some degree of difference, reading the interactions among players in the market

makes sense for organised crime and mafia studies, where there are different players competing over risky businesses.

While reviewing the contribution that organisational ecology can have for the understanding of criminal associations in criminal markets and within their own environment, this study is necessarily also referring to ecological perspectives from classical sociological studies of deviance, such as social disorganisation and differential association theories that see the occurrence of crime as interdependent on social and economic conditions within the environment of reference.

The final aim of this paper is to provide an example of how criminal associations move in their market field as competitors and, at the same time, how their birth, success and death depend on the environment as much as on other players in the same field/market. The bottom line of this argument is that if organised crime or mafia groups are often considered as business-oriented entities (Arlacchi and Ryle 1988; Paoli 2002; Von Lampe 2008; Edwards and Gill 2002) with prospects and means to accumulate criminal proceeds and alter the legal market, then it makes sense for criminological approaches to be merged with economic theories. This serves to investigate the phenomenon of organised crime and to identify and question general strategies and tactical choices of groups and individuals.

In order to develop this argument and for the case study on the *Famiglia Basilischi* – a criminal association in Basilicata, Southern Italy - this paper shall use data collected for a completed and earlier project: selected excerpts from interviews with journalists and prosecutors between Calabria and Basilicata, media monitoring and analyses; proceedings of the two trials in Basilicata and of other official documents available from the National Anti-Mafia Prosecutor Office. Data analysis is therefore based on qualitative data collection where different sources are analysed to better test theories and to facilitate the narrative of the authors. As any work based on assembled/aggregated data, especially when qualitative, the study is therefore inherently limited as it cannot provide detailed information and will necessarily suffer at times from approximation and lack of specificity of historical narrations. However, the value of this type of qualitative analysis lies in the stimulation of concepts beyond their usual boundaries, which is the final purpose of this interdisciplinary effort.

## **An introduction to principles of organisational ecology**

Before moving to the analysis of the case study, the basic principles and main features of Organisational Ecology need to be laid out, from a perspective that does not only serve the purposes of a criminological analysis, but is more inclusive for social sciences. To make this task easier and more effective, it is necessary to start from three main principles of organisational economy (Baum and Amburgey 2002):

1. Organisations and groups of organisations exhibit diversity, they evolve.
2. The more environments change and present uncertainties, the more organisations struggle to devise and execute changes fast enough.
3. Organisations' births and deaths happen in the market in different ways according to contextual social and economic circumstances.

Developing these observations, organisational ecology argues that changes happen at the population level and that birth and death of organisations – as well as their diversity - depend on populations' attributes, rather than on adaptation to the market or rational choices (McKelvey and Aldrich 1983; Campbell 1965). Organisational ecology, especially in some of its latest theorisations (Aldrich and Ruef 2006; Aldrich 2011) is an evolutionary approach to entrepreneurship that looks at change in organisations within certain environments. Changes in organisations reflect four basic economic processes that affect the life of organisations in the market (Baum and Amburgey 2002): *variation, selection, retention, and competition*.

In particular, we can understand *variation* as mutation (both accidental and planned); *selection* refers to the processes by which the market select organisations with optimal characteristics; *retention* refers to the quashing of rivals as much as to the establishment of work routines; *competition*, finally, refers to the relationship with other players in the market. In particular, (Aldrich 1999) develops the idea of competition as *struggle*, to better indicate how organisations are not passive to the environment, but rather they do fight against environmental selection and competitors. The struggle is one of the key moments to understand the relationship among different organisations, even criminal ones, in their market of interests, as it will be addressed later in this paper.

The processes of organisational ecology are differently conceived in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity; '*in a world of high uncertainty, adaptive efforts... turn out to be essentially random with respect to future value*' (Hannan and Freeman 1984: 150). When this is the case, *variations* – both accidental and planned - need to be considered also as human behaviours (Baum 1999). By focusing on these processes, Beck (2008) has argued and demonstrated that the theoretical foundations of organisational ecology are indeed more sociological than biological/rational. Organisational ecology approaches emphasise, on one side, the importance of the contexts for the birth, the evolution and the eventual failure of organisations. On the other side, they relate these alternatives to opportunity structures within the organisations as well as resource constraints and (in)ability of the leaders. Indeed, in organisational ecology approaches '*individuals do matter*' and they influence success, survival and death of the organisation (Baum 1999: 72). According to Breslin (2008), intentions of individual entrepreneurs play a great role in the strategic choices and the success rates of the organisations. However, even if individuals are crucial, they are not the sole reason for an organisation's success or failure. As said, ecological approaches insist on the importance of the environment, the population involved and social, economic and political changes. Moreover, as noted by Beck (2008), when considering a sociological approach to organisational ecology, it is necessary to focus on the concept of *competition* – the *struggle* - as determining reason for failure (or death) of organisations. Organisations may *struggle* for legitimacy or reputation in the market. Both the leaders, as well as the rest of the organisation's population might *struggle* to prevail over competitors, by adjusting their strategies and/or their leadership (Aldrich 1999).

In addition, Hannah and Freeman, in their 1977 seminal paper, claim that the ability of organisations to adapt to increasing competitive pressures - due to modifications in environmental settings - are challenged by several internal and external barriers. These barriers might be economic or legal complications, prior investments by competitors, specific skills (or lack of skills) of staff; like in other evolution theories, unfit

organisations will be exterminated in the field that challenges them (Hannan and Freeman 1977; Beck 2008). The expulsion of unfit organisations, however, as argued by Barnett and Amburgey (1990) is not the outcome of competitive pressures due to *density* in the field of reference - i.e. the *number* of organisations competing in the field – but by the (situational) *mass* of these organisations – the relationship between the *weight* of organisations in the market and their *size*, for which larger organisations trigger more competitive pressure. Additionally, if the number of organisations the environment can sustain varies over time, then the number of organisations that can survive in that environment also varies over time (Lomi et al. 2005). In this sense, organisations within this ecological framework need to be understood as changing and dynamic units among other units.

Evolution of strategies and changes in the environment are intertwined (Aldrich 1999) and determine the sorts of individual (new) organisations. Organisations differ not only in size and weight, but also in their form, which can be generalist or specialist. Generalist organisations move in a wider market and enjoy more access to resources than specialist ones; this increases their chances of survival in the market when the environment changes. In a pure economic perspective, generalist organisations aim at ensuring the satisfaction of the majority of customers while specialist organisations adapt to a narrower market – meeting the preferences of a niche. Visually, one could imagine generalists standing in the centre of the market and specialists at the margins.

Last but not least, for a sociological outlook at organisational ecology, the geographical positioning of both markets and customers is significant as parts of the environment and its changes. This means that local conditions do have an impact on density, resources, populations and success or failure of organisations (Beck 2008; Lomi et al. 2005; Lomi 1995). As argued by Aldrich (2011: 122) organisations are relational, as entrepreneurship is '*embedded in a social context, channelled and facilitated or constrained and inhibited by people's positions in social networks*'. The application of this mind-set to criminal organisations and their leaders is easily grasped. The entrepreneurial character of most organised crime groups together with an analysis of the personalities of the leaders impact strategic choices of the criminal group, as the case study will show.

In conclusion to this section, the theoretical foundations at the basis of organisational ecology can indeed be read in a sociological/criminological perspective. The importance that organisational ecology places on individuals, on environmental changes, on *situational mass* and form of organisations makes it a coherent framework to understand and test success and failure of organisations (legal but also illegal) within a given market (legal and also illegal). In studying the way organisations emerge, evolve and die - while considering their fluctuations in competitiveness, the changes in social or economic contexts and the characteristics of the populations involved – organisational ecology assumes that everything stays in motion and everything changes as a product of interaction. If that is the case, then, looking at crime and especially criminal associations, through the lenses of organisational ecology allows following and understanding the changes and the constant motion of such social phenomena much better.

## The environment and criminal organisations in criminology

Criminological theories have, on occasions, approached the study of organised crime groups by referring to the study of the environment. It is necessary to reflect on these approaches to better understand how to subsume criminological thinking within organisational ecology. Generally speaking, organised crime is understood either through a focus on the criminal activities committed by criminal groups or through a focus on the typology of structures/networks these groups adopt (Obokata 2010; Paoli and Fijnaut 2006). Organised crime scholars have been considering criminal associations either as illicit enterprises (Paoli 2002; Von Lampe 2008) - therefore responding to rational choice models and theories (Von Lampe 2011) - or as social entities - therefore responding to social theories and social behaviours, within organisational studies (Kleemans and de Poot 2008; Edwards and Levi 2008).

Furthermore, when focusing on criminal associations, research can investigate people's relationships with the environment by concentrating on criminogenic elements as well as on the interactions and relationships among individuals within a criminal group. Among theories of deviance, an example of the former is social disorganisation theory applied to criminal groups – as a study of the interactions between crime and socio-economic circumstances - and an example of the latter is differential association theory – as a social influence theory.

Shaw and McKay's (1942) seminal work on social disorganisation links the frequency of social problems – such as poverty, disease, low birth weight - with higher delinquency rates in certain areas of Chicago. Areas in deprived conditions experience a breakdown of informal social controls paired with the evolution of offending norms in interactions among younger people at the local level. This leads to crime and deviance and cultural transmission of delinquent values; older people in the area cannot ensure social control and younger people instead feed their own subculture of offending, irrespective of their ethnic origins. Social disorganisation theory finds the cause of delinquency in the criminogenic nature of the environment, rather than in cultural legacies. This is an aspect that clearly meets the principles of organisational ecology.

Research that has followed Shaw and McKay's version of social disorganisation has criticised, as well as confirmed, various aspects of the original work. Apart from some criticisms mostly linked to the peculiarity of youth crime (Sampson et al. 2002; Wikstrom and Loeber 2000) or to the specifics of ethnic groups in certain urban areas (Heitgard and Bursik 1987; Taylor and Covington 1988) a fierce critique of the theory is the notion of 'ecological fallacy' (Robinson 1950) according to which social disorganisation bases assumptions about individual behaviours based on aggregate data. Moreover, even though Shaw and McKay's research has been tremendously influential in the way criminology has looked at the interactions between space and crime, in social disorganisation theory there is no direct mentioning of organised adult criminality (Lombardo 2014). However, because of the use of aggregate data, this research could validate generalisable principles, thus a theory. In fact, the cultural transmission of delinquent values, even though mostly happening among youth, is also a crucial element in studies on traditional forms of organised crime – such as Italian mafias. In deprived neighbourhoods there can be a breakdown of trust in authority and thus the rise of counter-culture in delinquency also among adults against

structures of power (Hope and Sparks 2000; Von Lampe and Johansen 2004; Gambetta 1993).

If social disorganisation theory looks at how criminogenic characteristics of the environment can nurture delinquent cultures, Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory – enriching social disorganisation theory – interprets the existence of deviancy through the study of groups in society that gravitate around illegal activities and share values, attitudes and criminal motives with others. Differential association theory is a theory of social influence as it understands crime as a learned behaviour mostly in group settings (Matsueda 1988). It did set the grounds for studies on interaction among delinquents and their interactions in groups. Like social disorganisation theory, differential association theory does not include considerations on individual personality traits, but works on individual criminality as product of interaction within groups and through a social process. Variations in social structures and group organisation can explain the difference in crime rates across different groups; group processes explain and affect changes in crime rates over time as they are dynamic. It follows that groups in certain environments are necessarily interacting not only with each other but also with the environment itself where the culture of delinquency is shared and learned (Cloward and Ohlin 1960).

In organised crime studies, principles from differential association theory have been used to study the 'underworld' as product of cultural transmission and learning. The theory has mostly been applied to the world of professional criminals (Hobbs 1997) as well as maintaining its original focus on youth gangs and learning mechanisms (Kissner and Pyrooz 2009). Also, on a general note studies on organised crime can rely on social research and the study of the environment to understand criminal behaviours and impact of criminal activities on societies. However, research often focuses on criminal networks, rather than criminal markets, and it analyses roles of offenders within networks as well as changing roles of individuals and groups of individuals in organised crime activities (Campana 2011; Hobbs 1998; Calderoni 2012; Coles 2001).

We can clearly see how criminological theories have attempted to link the environment and its characteristics to the formation of criminal groups and secondarily to organised crime studies. These theories are necessarily linked to social and ethnographic research and distant from the national/global security rhetoric that organised crime has been acquiring in the past two decades (Van Duyne 2011; Edwards and Gill 2003). It is indeed a complex task to combine knowledge from different criminological sources and approaches without encountering contradictions and dilemmas. Studies that have been linking the environment to the existence of criminal associations – as groups engaged in organised crime activities *latu sensu* – can be seen as either looking at the social and/or the economic links among individuals, groups and criminal activities. Organisational ecology, in this sense, opens another window into criminological studies to look at the interactions between environmental conditions and (criminal) organisations.

This is even truer for studies on mafia groups in Italy. Mafia groups are types of criminal associations supported by social prestige and capable of infiltrating the legal economy and politics (Sciarrone and Storti 2014). Mafia is the prototypical case of criminal structures transcending class divisions and the divide between illegal and legal (Von Lampe 2008). Sciarrone (2011) has described mafias in the South of Italy as social

forces with the power to accumulate and employ social capital. Employing Coleman's (1990) social capital definition, Sciarrone (2011: 7) defines mafia networks as social structures whose resources can be employed to realise 'strategic goals'. These strategic goals are mostly profit-driven, even though mafia groups are embedded in the social environment they proliferate in and, therefore, are also concerned with maintaining their social status (Varese 2011). Whether or not a criminal group qualifies as mafia in Italy is often a matter of judicial labelling. In fact, Anti-mafia laws stigmatise mafia membership very clearly as a stand-alone offence (article 416-bis of the criminal code). Clearly before mafia membership criminalisation comes an assertion (in a judicial sentence) of a group as mafia (Sergi 2014). As of today, the National Antimafia Prosecution Office (Direzione Nazionale Antimafia) has recognised three named mafia groups in Italy (Cosa Nostra, 'ndrangheta and Camorra) and two other 'mafia-type' networks, the groups formerly known as Sacra Corona Unita in Puglia, and the groups belonging to the (former) Famiglia Basilischi in Basilicata (DNA 2014). The case study on the history of the Famiglia Basilischi reveals how the birth of the group, its struggles to establish its criminal reputation and its 'death' were tightly linked to the environment of Basilicata. In this case, a criminological analysis can help us understand how criminogenic the social conditions of the environment were. Also, criminological theory can be used to assess how likely it was for a mafia group to flourish in that specific environment with reference to social differentiation and learning of criminal values. In addition to all this, principles from organisational ecology support criminological analyses in assessing how variations in the environment, relationships with other players in the market, competition and struggle as well as strategic choices of the leaders essentially contributed to the evolution, success and failure of the criminal group. The result is a composite qualitative socio-economic and criminological evaluation that can enhance our understanding of criminal association *in motion* within a given environment.

## Case study: the Famiglia Basilischi in Italy

### The environment

The Basilicata region, also known as Lucania, in the South of Italy is one of the poorest Italian regions (Centro Studi Unioncamere della Basilicata 2011). It is a region of roughly 600,000 inhabitants split in two provinces - Potenza and Matera - where there is little or no space for investments and little or no space for growth (Milio and Todaro 2013). Often considered as appendix either of the near Campania or Puglia or Calabria, Basilicata is far behind the average standard of the rest of Italy and - as it happens for other regions in the South of Italy - this is both cause and effect of the presence of criminal groups active in the area. When it comes to organised crime in southern Italy, echoes of mafia studies must come to mind. In order to understand criminal organisations in Basilicata, it is essential to consider how also in Basilicata mafia interests have developed and how relationships of local criminal groups with other neighbouring criminal groups have influenced the birth and death of local criminal associations.

Crucially, Basilicata is surrounded by three regions of the South of Italy hosting the main Italian mafias as categorised today (DNA 2014). To the north-west there is



Campania with the Camorra; north-east Puglia with criminal groups belonging to Apulian criminal families (formerly known as Sacra Corona Unita); south is Calabria with the 'ndrangheta and Sicily with Cosa Nostra is not that far either. In particular, the fact that, geographically speaking, Basilicata is in the middle among such criminal forces - especially the Calabrian 'ndrangheta, today receiving growing national and international attention (Varese 2011; Sciarrone and Storti 2014) – has definitely been considered one of the primary reasons for the birth of autochthonous organised crime groups in the region (Sergi 2003; Sergi 2013). This should not come as a surprise, if one considers the conditions, which might lead to mafias' growth: underdevelopment, absence of transparent political interests, absence of regulation in the legal markets, criminal opportunities and absence of already established mafia groups (Varese 2011; Busso and Storti 2011). Mafia density – a composite measure including investigations/trials and asset seizures for mafia offences – above and below Basilicata – in Calabria and Campania - has been indicated as the highest in the country (Calderoni 2011; Calderoni and Caneppele 2009). Moreover, Basilicata is a very small region, whose economy has never been healthy. The links between economic interests and criminal interests have been exposed by scandals regarding public administrators and local politicians, revealing a contaminated political environment (Sergi 2003). Within this environment we find the Famiglia Basilischi, a criminal organisation made up of about 25 clans recently under investigation and scrutiny from anti-mafia authorities and labelled 'mafia group' in a sentence in 2007. Its birth, evolution and affirmation and its failures in the criminal market are symptomatic of an environment with high-density criminal presence as well as very weak social structures.

### The events

The Famiglia Basilischi (simply known as 'the Basilischi') has been labelled 'the Fifth Mafia' in a sentence of 700 pages drafted by the judges of an anti-mafia maxi-trial in Potenza in 2007. The judges recognised to the group the ability to both conduct illegal activities and to influence political outcomes, as other Italian mafias. The sentence of the first-degree trial was confirmed in 2012 in appeal (Sergi 2013). For convenience of this paper, the period of interest for the study of the Famiglia Basilischi goes from 1994 – formal birth of the association - to 2012 – its judicial death.

The family's name comes from a movie of 1963 produced by film-maker Lina Wertmüller titled 'I Basilischi' and set in the beautiful set of Matera; the movie pictured the South of Italy and a class of lazy and wealthy characters who lived at the edge of (il)legality. Forty-five years after the movie, a criminal clan has inherited that name also thanks to the assonance with the name of the region. Sergi (2003) demonstrated that until the 1980s authorities, scholars and society in general, believed that the region was immune from mafia crime groups. Even though the region was poor and underdeveloped after the Second World War, this did not systematically link to the evolution of mafia-type criminality. However, when after an earthquake in 1980 funds were allocated to the region, other criminal groups, such as the Calabrian 'ndrangheta saw an opportunity to reach out for criminals in Basilicata and involve them in Calabrian criminal affairs (Sergi 2003).

There are at least four periods in the evolution and then involution of the Famiglia Basilischi. First, we have a decade of incubation of symptoms, which, however, falls

beyond the remit of this paper as placed before the official birth of the association (1994). These symptoms were criminal activities linked to groups in other regions, recurring family names, existence of fake companies linked to those names to peruse European funds, evidence of drug dealing and extortions, homicides, arsons and violence used typically in mafia wars (Sergi 2001; Gelormini 1990; Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia 1992). After various attempts from local groups during the 1980s to rise above others as believable mafia groups (for example the Nuova Famiglia Lucana announcing its existence through newspapers in 1991) it became clear to the authorities of the time that criminal activities in the region were still in the hands of other groups, mainly the 'ndrangheta (Sergi 2003; Sergi 2001). Calabrian clans in Basilicata acted as guarantors, by providing organisational tools and expertise to local criminal groups allowing them to participate in serious and organised criminal activities (Sergi 2003). The second period is the independence, which came in 1994 when Giovanni Luigi Cosentino, while in prison, received authorisation from a 'ndrangheta clan (the Morabito clan) to officially form the 'Famiglia Basilischi' as an autonomous mafia group. The Basilischi were formed to control criminal markets in Basilicata by unifying all scattered criminal groups across the territory and by officially affiliating members through rituals borrowed from the 'ndrangheta.

In April 1999, the Prosecutors in Potenza issued 84 arrest warrants and started a maxi-trial to put behind bars all main affiliates of the organisation. In 2000, as the maxi-trial officially started with the charging of 38 people, the boss Cosentino began to cooperate with the prosecutors and revealed precious information about the organisation, its hierarchies, its rackets, its drug trafficking routes and connections, its political infiltration and its involvement in public and private investments (Sergi 2013). This was the third important moment in the history of the Basilischi. The trial ended in 2007, with 26 people being sentenced for mafia affiliation in the first degree. Even though for many that marked the end of the 'Famiglia Basilischi' – because those who were supposedly high-ranking in the Family were behind bars – the organisation resurged and reformed under the leadership of Antonio Cossidente, a sign that the bases were strong enough from the beginning and that mafia ideals and culture are rooted in the region (Cozzi 2010; Cozzi 2014). This is the fourth period. The first-degree sentence was substantially confirmed when the appeals trial ended in October 2012, with the conviction of 36 out of the 38 charged for crimes that happened before 1999 (Sergi 2012). This is the decline of the Basilischi, starting with Cossidente's arrest and him becoming an informant in 2010. After 2012 the Basilischi have officially been dismantled (DNA 2014). On one side other pre-established mafia clans from Calabria and Campania have taken over criminal markets in Basilicata, but on the other side, more and more investigations lead Anti-mafia prosecutors to uncover worrying connections between local administrators and politicians and members of the former Famiglia Basilischi (Amato 2012a; Amato 2012b; Amato 2012c).

### **The organisation**

There are two moments in the life of the Famiglia Basilischi, which are important for understanding the organisation of the group. First, 1994, the year the Famiglia Basilischi was officially founded. Second, the period right after the first arrests, the years 2000–2012. However, what happened after 2007–2010 (end of first trial and start

of Cossidente's cooperation with the authorities) cannot be fully considered as part of the Basilischi's story (which were decimated by the trial), but rather a period of transition from a formal organisation to the current (apparent) disorganisation of criminal groups in Basilicata. Both periods are characterised by a binomial wave of success-failure and are linked to different individuals sharing similar fates.

When the authorities first approached at the organisation of the Basilischi in 1999 they found what looked like a thoroughly organised association shaped with the rituals and the ranks of the Calabrian 'ndrangheta. The boss Cosentino, upon deciding to cooperate with prosecutors in 1999, had handed in a 20-pages code, which every 'novice' needed to learn by heart before taking the oath of affiliation to the criminal organisation. There are references to the 'five parts of the tree', a famous metaphor that described the 'ndrangheta (Ciconte 2011; Ciconte 2015). This tree is divided in five parts; the trunk represents the 'capobastone', the boss, and his executive. Then, there are the branches which represent the 'mastro di giornata', the bookkeeper, the 'camorristi di sangue (blood), di sgarro (mistake) e di seta (silk)', various types of mafia ministers and executioners (they perform extortions and retaliations through various degrees of violence). The twigs are the 'picciotti', those just recruited, and then there are the flowers, youth of honour, the hope of the organisation for the future. This metaphor, which has been accepted as the archaic structure of the Calabrian clans, might not necessarily mirror today's organisational chart of the 'ndrangheta (Ciconte 2015). This gives even more the idea of the fictitious character of the birth of the Basilischi rooted in mystical archaic rituals.

As in every other secret society, silence and 'omertà' (conspiracy of silence) were the 'lymph' feeding the organisation; it is a social hierarchy. The Basilischi recruited members from smaller clans with the permission and the promise to enter bigger illegal trafficking activities - especially drugs - from the Calabrian families. It seems quite obvious that the easier structure to adopt was the model of the 'ndrine, the units of the 'ndrangheta. In its first period the Basilischi, therefore, were, on one side modelled upon the historical organisation of the Calabrian mafia, but on the other side crucially dependent on the figure of their boss, Cosentino, who was almost worshipped as he was the one who had received and earned the Basilischi's independence from the Calabrians (Sergi 2003). Interestingly, this last point - the worshipping of the boss - was not borrowed from the 'ndrangheta, where the boss is not idolised, but rather feared and respected for his criminal credentials (Ciconte 2015).

The judicial operations that led to the arrests in 1999 and the following high number of *pentiti* (those who decided to cooperate with authorities) undermined the cohesion of the association and changed the structure of the Basilischi. According to the prosecutors, Antonio Cossidente, the boss who followed Cosentino, since 2003 - and after new investigations and further arrests - started offering information to the authorities to bring down some of his rivals around the region (DNA 2011). At that moment, those clans of the 'ndrangheta involved from the start started to be afraid of repercussions and violent outbursts. They decided to intervene and 'split' the region in six areas of influence each represented by a person of their choice, a sub-boss responding to Cossidente but working for the Calabrians too (Sergi 2013; DNA 2011). The number six is typical of the way the 'ndrangheta works: each *locale* of the 'ndrangheta (an independent area united under a recognised boss) needs seven clans to be recognised (Sergi 2012; Ciconte 2015). By having only six, the Calabrian clans de facto take back

the Basilischi's independence and regain control over the region and its illegal market. This eventually left Cossidente, slowly deprived of his status, to become an informant in 2010 and to reveal secrets about the organisation, such as the connections with politics, the routes of drug trafficking, the extent of the links with the 'ndrangheta and generally the way the criminal activities were carried out. Since 2010 other families have appeared on the territory, more or less linked with criminal groups from the North (in Campania), the East (in Puglia) and the South (in Calabria). Today's criminal activities that used to be the Famiglia Basilischi's, seem indeed undergoing massive changes not easy to detect for the authorities (DNA 2014).

### Affiliation and leadership

Although modern and recently formed, the heart of this mafia group is linked to rituals of affiliation, symbols and social codes. Rituals cement brotherhood and have always been one of the most mysterious and attractive features of Italian mafias whose members live intimately connected to their groups through an enhanced sense of belonging (Ciconte 2015; Nicaso and Gratteri 2012). Like in other mafias, even in the 'Famiglia Basilischi' members had to pronounce an oath in front of other associates (Nicaso and Gratteri 2012). The oath was very similar to the one of the Calabrian 'ndrangheta and was a crucial moment for the criminal group. Like other mafia groups, the Basilischi behaved as a secret society, with esoteric rituals and requesting a total submission to the leader during their rituals (Sergi 2003). Obscure symbols and ceremonies especially for the initiation, were the glue that bound the affiliates together. The rituals were solemn liturgies and a mix of old masonic rituals and ancient secret brotherhood oaths adapted to the needs of a modern organisation. Every new member taking the oath became a 'man of honour' for life; however out-dated these rituals might seem in our century, they are the start of the 'falling in love' process and the strength of the cult of every mafia as group narcissism (Di Forti 1982). As different penitenti have stated, the process to become a 'Basilisco' was a mystic journey (Sergi 2003). Also thanks to these binding esoteric rituals, Cosentino, from prison in 1994, managed to bring under the same umbrella members of different and smaller clans everywhere in the region.

As said, the organisation solidly relied on the charisma of the boss to function. Cosentino – known as 'Angel Face' - affiliated to both the Calabrian 'ndrangheta and the Camorra, is the recognised founder (Sergi 2003). The establishment of the Famiglia Basilischi represented his chance to step out of common, 'disorganised' criminality and become a leader with the endorsement and promotion from powerful *mafiosi* from Calabria. His leadership, as seen, is only apparently successful. After only five years the first round of arrests maimed the organisation and Cosentino himself decided to 'betray' the Family (Amendolara 2006c). His cooperation with justice however, was not the most successful either. Cosentino proved not to be a trustworthy *pentito*, as he failed to provide the authorities with any clear information; he eventually received a high sentence of 21 years in prison (Amato 2013b; Amato 2013a).

Antonio Cossidente, who followed Cosentino's lead in the second period of the Famiglia, does not appear to have been a more stable leader for the second generation of members of the Basilischi, as he is unable to resurrect the Famiglia from the ashes left by the arrests in 1999–2000 (Cozzi 2010; Amato 2009). On one side, as he had

been at Cosentino's side from the beginning, he knew the territory and he had connections he could exploit to continue the Family's business. On the other side, under his leadership the Family was broken down into various areas of influence under the more powerful leadership of the 'ndrangheta. Cossidente attempts to strengthen the relationship with the Morabito clan in the 'ndrangheta for cocaine trafficking while being suspected of also running the private security business in the entertainment industry of the area (Amendolara 2006b; Amato 2010; Amato 2011b). However, rivalries and feuds have destroyed the last standing units still linked to the original core of the Famiglia Basilischi. Individual rivalries, such as the one between Cossidente and Saverio Riviezzi for example, who, from another area of influence, sought to rule the city of Potenza, turned the clans against each other and facilitated judiciary actions (Sergi 2013; Sergi 2012; Amendolara 2006a). Cossidente was arrested on a number of occasions for different activities (from sports fraud to illegal gambling) and decided to officially cooperate in 2010. He gave the authorities information about links between politics and mafia in the region, which have led to more investigations that are still ongoing today (DNA 2014).

### **Criminal strategies and criminal activities**

When the Anti-mafia authorities issued the 84 arrest warrants in 1999, among the targeted individuals there were no ostensibly wealthy people: the 'Famiglia Basilischi' seemed quite poor. Public opinion wondered whether that meant that the clans were not successful or that those targeted were principally small fish (Sergi 2003). Nevertheless, arrest warrants kept coming in the following years as a sign that the actions and networks of the Family were more complex than it might have seemed. In general, the activities of the Famiglia Basilischi seemed quite eclectic and varied.

Indeed, the main interest of the Basilischi was to secure control over criminal markets in and through the region, by endorsing a cult of leadership and brotherhood (Amato 2011a). The group started with 'successful' – and violent – activities typical of mafia groups: extortions, loan-sharking and robberies while they obtained from the 'ndrangheta clans the permission to enter the drug and arms markets (DNA 2011). Arms and drugs trafficking represented the ideal markets for the emancipation from the 'ndrangheta mainly because of the geographical position of Basilicata that allows easy access to the sea towards (and from) the Balkans through the Apulian region (DNA 2011). Among other activities, at the local level, beside extortion and loan sharking, the Family was also engaged in ecomafia activities. These activities were mainly related to illegal waste dumping led by the Camorra clans, which, also in Basilicata, detained the leadership in this field (Guardia di Finanza 1996). Furthermore, the Basilischi were also involved in an investigation related to illegal storage of radioactive materials, solid and liquid waste of high nuclear activity, in cooperation with 'ndrangheta clans (Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia 1997).

Another successful local activity relates to protection rackets, placed even on the carriage carrying the Madonna during the city festival in Matera to ensure no disturbance during the celebration (Ansa. 2000). Other local activities involved tampering with public contracts and investments related to oil deposits in Val D'Agri or the dealership of Fiat cars in Melfi (Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia 1997). In particular, the investments in Val D'Agri attracted both criminal organisations outside

Basilicata (from Apulia, Calabria and Campania) as well as being of interests of the political class because of the oil deposits, which are a peculiarity of Basilicata.

The clans were also offering money laundering as a service for other clans from Calabria and Campania (Ansa. 2001a; Ansa. 2001b). Money laundering in Basilicata at the time of the Basilischi was done either through *smurfing* techniques or even through counterfeited banknotes. The authorities discovered a printing facility in Potenza that issued American Dollars to be sold to Latin American drug partners (Iovino 1999). This allowed the clans, on one side, to generate proceeds of crime, which then needed to be laundered and integrated into the regular financial system. On the other side, the trafficking of counterfeit currency is '*placement of currency notes, albeit fake, into the regular financial stream*', which can only be done '*through an effective laundering process, which not only conceals the and camouflages the origin of the fake currency, but also the fact that they are counterfeits*' (FATF. 2013: 25).

Moreover, the Family was also involved in public sector fraud, for example against the Public Health Service, made possible, amongst other things, because of links with influential individuals in the public sector and in local politics (Iovino 1999). Lastly, in a recent investigation in May 2015, prosecutors also established how Antonio Cossidente, during his leadership, successfully established political connections, which he then exploited for the elections in the city of Potenza in 2004, through exchanges of favours and corruption (Amato 2015). The successful link between mafia clans and politics is symptomatic of the tight control of the territory that the Basilischi were attempting to secure.

### **Analysis: a qualitative assessment of the Famiglia Basilischi**

From an organisational point of view, the Famiglia Basilischi had a birthday, a first death sentence, a short period of resurrection and a final moment of death. These are: 1994, the year of foundation; 1999, the year 84 arrests were issued; the early 2000s when some of the clans still surviving were organised in areas of interests by the 'ndrangheta; 2012, the appeal trial after Cossidente decides to cooperate in 2010 and local feuds have decimated – physically or judicially - the remaining clans. In the evolution of this criminal association, there is a not-so-absent protagonist, the Calabrian 'ndrangheta (at least some of its clans), which is arguably the reason why the Basilischi were born in the first place and partially the reason why they did not develop as promised. The table below summarises and organises the events related to the Famiglia Basilischi for an easier approach through the principles of organisational ecology merged with the classic criminological theories mentioned (Table 1).

From the analysis of judicial data and journalistic events available on the Famiglia Basilischi, there are a number of emerging considerations to make related to strategies and tactics of this organised crime group. Crucially, the experience of the Famiglia Basilischi can be read as an unfulfilled promise of criminal supremacy in Basilicata. The promise was made by a stronger group belonging to a more established criminal organisation, the Calabrian 'ndrangheta. However, the (criminal) environment, the presence of more established competitors (among which both Camorra and different 'ndrangheta clans) as well as the personality of the leaders, have reduced the possibilities of success for this new organisation.

**Table 1** The Famiglia Basilischi: Organisational Ecology and Criminological Theories

Organisational Ecology	Classic Criminological Theories	Famiglia Basilischi
Birth of the Organisation	Social Disorganisation - Cultural Transmission of Mafia values	1994: Cosentino founds the Famiglia Basilischi following interactions with Calabrian clans and after reading local needs.
Geography		The environment is criminogenic. Smaller criminal groups already exist but stronger/more established mafia-type groups are in neighbouring regions.
Organisation Type		Generalist mafia organisation largely adopting the existing successful model of the Calabrian 'ndrangheta.
Population	Differential Association - Social Learning	Formal affiliation through rituals - imposition of shared values and norms.
Individuals (Leaders)		The two main leaders (Cosentino and Cossidente) are essential for the evolution/involvement of the group.
Changes in the (Criminal) Environment	Variations in Social Structures - Environmental Interactions	Judicial operations undermine the cohesion of the group, hindering its evolution and exposing its weaknesses. The Calabrian 'ndrangheta intervenes to regulate the criminal markets in Basilicata when the main affiliates of the Famiglia Basilischi are jailed.
Competitors/Struggle		The clans in Calabria (and in Campania) represent more established actors for successful criminal activities.
Internal Barriers		The behaviour of the boss Cosentino and the feuds among clans during the second period with Cossidente are detrimental to the group.
External Barriers		Judicial operations expose the weaknesses of the group at the strategic level. The presence of other specialist and generalist criminal groups, more experienced and controlling over activities in Basilicata makes it difficult to compete and to fix emerging problems successfully.
Death	N/A	Judicial death comes in three moments; arrests 1999; first trial 2007; second trial 2012.

Indeed, in organisational ecology terms, the events surrounding the birth, evolution and decline of the Famiglia Basilischi can be summarised within competition frameworks. The Famiglia Basilischi was born in an area which presents all the ingredients, from a socio-economic point of view, that have led neighbouring regions to develop autochthonous mafia groups (Asmundo 2011). The environment, also poor and underdeveloped, is, therefore, highly criminogenic from a criminological point of view. The existence of small and disorganised criminal groups in the region represents an

occasion for other mafia groups – such as the ‘ndrangheta or the Camorra – to invest in social capital for local and national criminal activities. When stronger ‘ndrangheta clans granted permission to Cosentino to form a new *locale* and independent mafia group, a first strategic error was made. The Basilischi are created as copycat of the stronger, larger, generalist Calabrian mafia. Interestingly, Aldrich (1999) argues that most new organisations take on the form that is prevailing in the environment at the time of foundation, that is to say that new enterprises tend to adopt winning models of other enterprises already in the market. Similarly, the creation of new organisations, for Aldrich (1999) responds to networks and existing relationships with other players, that is to say that ‘who you know’ matters in the creation and adoption of strategies and models when founding a new organisation. The relevance of these theoretical approaches for the case in object is obvious: the Famiglia Basilischi borrowed rituals and organisational structures from the winning model of the Calabrian ‘ndrangheta, which, at the same time, represented the direct – more established - contact of the founder of the Basilischi.

Indeed, the Famiglia Basilischi was established as a generalist mafia group, involved in various types of activities – from prostitution, to extortion, to gambling, to environmental crimes. It was however, a small size organisation that existed in a highly competitive and dense criminal environment, geographically squeezed between two (if not three, with the Apulian groups nearby) strong criminal groups – Camorra and ‘ndrangheta. Whereas on one side, it is easy to see how social learning and shared criminal values can work in such an environment, it is also difficult to envisage a small size generalist group - fresh from independence - maintaining a strong position in that criminal market without a niche activity. Indeed, it is not the *density* in the criminal market, but rather the *situational mass* of the competitors that saturated the market the Basilischi were trying to dominate. The weight of ‘ndrangheta and Camorra together with their size, clearly bigger than the Famiglia Basilischi, determined the failure of the latter. The existence of a criminal niche for the Famiglia Basilischi could probably have strengthened their position against other competitors. If, for example, we look at the Casalesi clan in Campania, which is today one of the wealthiest clans of the Camorra in Campania, we find them pioneering environmental crimes in the region (illicit waste dumping mainly) since the 1980s, and today almost monopolising this field (Lavorgna 2015). The specialisation of the Casalesi in this illegal practice in a very dense criminal environment has in practice allowed them to rise above other local clans and to progress into being one of the most powerful clans in Italy (Greyl et al. 2013). This is the opposite of what happened in Basilicata. As previously said, if visually we imagine generalists standing in the centre of the market and specialists at the margins (Hannan and Freeman 1984), in Basilicata the margins looked quite slim.

In addition, there are two specific aspects about the Basilischi, which are worth focusing on and that are strictly linked to the criminal environment of reference: first, the brotherhood/competition with the ‘ndrangheta clans; second, the behaviours of the leaders. The Calabrian ‘ndrangheta is object of increasing scholarship and research in and outside Italy (Varese 2005; Dickie 2013; Macrì and Ciconte 2009; Varese 2011; Sciarrone and Storti 2014; Sergi 2015b; Sergi 2015a). The debate around the role, the structure and reach of the ‘ndrangheta clans is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it suffices to report that according to Italian national Anti-mafia prosecutors, the ‘ndrangheta group represents today the most advanced and successful form



of mafia in Italy and Europe (DNA 2014). Some ‘ndrangheta clans, whose supremacy in the drug market in the South of Italy is well known, saw it profitable to expand to the close Basilicata region where there was no autochthonous mafia. The Calabrian clans have therefore lent to local criminals in Basilicata a start-up business model to grow independent, probably to keep a privileged entry in the markets in Basilicata. The ‘ndrangheta model – consisting of rituals, specialised roles, flexibility of structures and aggressive access to illegal markets - is successful as the ‘ndrangheta has replicated it on other occasions (Varese 2011; Varese 2005; Ciconte 2010; Sciarrone 2014). Even though the 2007 sentence against the Famiglia Basilischi declared that the Family had the characteristics of a mafia association (it was named the Fifth Mafia), nevertheless the independence of the Famiglia Basilischi was only fictitious. Indeed, when in 1994 Cosentino received the permission to form the new mafia group, the rituals, the codes of behaviours and the keys to access to the drug market were provided by the clans of the ‘ndrangheta involved in the ‘project’ of creation of an independent criminal supremacy in Basilicata. The new organisation was given the tools for the job, rather than setting up their own toolkit through local know-how or changing the rituals according to the characteristics of local groups. When after five years the wave of arrests hit the organisation, it became clear that there might have been autonomy but there wasn’t independence. Indeed, right after the first boss, Cosentino, was arrested alongside other key members of the association, the ‘ndrangheta intervened to save the remaining Basilischi and to secure its own status on the criminal market in Basilicata. The ‘ndrangheta - which supposedly had handed the leadership over local markets to Cosentino with the formation of the Famiglia in 1994 – has first ‘delegated’ power and afterwards acted as a guarantor (Sergi 2003). The role of the ‘ndrangheta was crucial to resume mafia activities during the leadership of Cossidente. As described earlier, the division of the region in six areas of territorial control, each with a sub-leader, is a clear message of the supremacy of the Calabrian clans over local ones in Basilicata, which could not attain independence alone in the 1990s and later could not stay independent either. If seven is the number to create a new *locale*, a new independent group within the ‘ndrangheta (Ciconte 2011; Sergi 2013) having six units implied that the seventh remained in Calabria (Sergi 2012). After 2000, criminal groups in Basilicata essentially become subsidiaries of the ‘ndrangheta and the promise of independence under one local leadership was abandoned.

A second point to raise, linked to the one about autonomy/independence discussed so far, is the quality of leadership within the Famiglia Basilischi. Specifically with reference to the two main leaders, Cosentino and Cossidente, the approach to leadership in the group represented an internal barrier to the evolution and success of the Family. It seems quite obvious - by reading the rituals and the codes of the Basilischi - that the group was born with a clear cult of the boss. The process to become a *Basilisco*, in fact, required a voluntary subjection to the boss and the recognition of his supremacy in the group. While this is not something that had been inherited from the ‘ndrangheta (where the structure of clans is less formalised around the figure of the leader, see (Ciconte 2015)), it was at the same time not surprising in a smaller group like the Basilischi. Furthermore, both Cosentino and Cossidente had the charisma to be leaders, but they eventually could not cope with the variations imposed on the groups by external factors. Cosentino becomes a *pentito* quite soon after being arrested. Cossidente becomes a *pentito* only in 2010; the two, however, lead two very different groups.

The judicial attack in 1999 severely altered the criminal and social structure of the group by upsetting the organisation given at birth by Cosentino. When Cossidente took over the leadership of the remaining families, his behaviours undermined the unity of the group, as he enters in personal feuds with Saverio Riviezzi, sub-leader of another area of influence, and eased the work of the authorities in dismantling other groups (Amendolara 2006a; Sergi 2012). It can be argued that the relationship between Cossidente and the 'ndrangheta clans (mainly the Morabito clan) resembled the famous relationship between Hitler and the Vichy government in France during the Second World War – a puppet government controlled by the stronger power. Cossidente, indeed, was more concerned with his criminal activities in the urban area of Potenza, where he was the leader, rather than about his overall strategic leadership as a *Basilisco* boss. Cosentino fully personified the leader expected to act almost with *hubris*, as the chosen person to form the new group (Amato 2011a) and, as such, he was expected to act in the name of the group (and failed). On the other side, Cossidente's leadership was linked more to his own territory, the city of Potenza, and local-level criminal activities rather than to an overall strategy for the remaining areas of influence still under the name of the Basilischi.

As a concluding thought on this case study, it seems safe to say that the Famiglia Basilischi was a disorganised or a semi-organised organisation clearly linked to the sorts of the environment of Basilicata. The position of the Basilicata region and its proximity to other mafia groups made it possible to transmit mafia culture. At the same time, being so close to the 'ndrangheta also allowed the Calabrian clans to interfere with the Basilischi's business beyond the initial brotherhood. As a consequence, the feeble autonomy enjoyed by the Basilischi paired with poor leadership skills and the lack of a specific niche in the criminal market for the Basilischi to exploit, made it impossible for the group to establish its reputation as an independent mafia group for longer than 5 years. For all these elements - and obviously also because of external factors (i.e. judicial interventions) - the experiment of the Famiglia Basilischi has to be considered strategically flawed and tactically naïve.

## Reading the ecological (dis)organisation of criminal associations

Through a generalisation of principles from theories and the case study, five components of an analysis of criminal organisations between organisational ecology and criminological theories emerge. They are briefly summarised and explained below as a starting point for further research in the field:

### Criminogenic environment

As seen in the case of the Famiglia Basilischi, it is justified to question the factors that make a certain territory more or less 'suitable' to develop a mafia-type group. Social disorganisation and differential association argue how socio-economic circumstances do play a crucial role in shaping human relationships as well as in characterising the environment and in developing shared (criminal) culture. Poverty, street crime, economic depression and corruption are all elements that, among others, may facilitate the

activities of organised crime groups. Criminogenic factors that make an environment particularly prone to the formation of mafia-type criminality are both structural and cultural. For example, the existence and strength of local criminal groups is a structural factor while a diffused family-based clientelism (Sergi 2015b) is arguably a cultural factor. Similarly, a weak contractual regulation, which allows fairly easy access of criminal groups into commercial ventures as well as permitting the tampering with public tenders, is a structural weakness; proximity to already established mafia groups is a cultural factor. An analysis of criminogenic factors in a given environment also based on similar other environments, therefore, is useful to predict and prevent as well as better counteract criminal threats.

### **Autonomy/independence**

The lack of real independence from the Calabrian ‘ndrangheta has represented one of the main reasons why the Famiglia Basilischi has failed to become and maintain its status as credible mafia group. A criminogenic environment, like Basilicata for example, necessarily hosts other forms of criminality, more or less organised. It is necessary, therefore, to assess the degree of autonomy enjoyed in reality by local criminal groups. This can be done by looking at the birth of these criminal groups as well as at the evolution of their criminal plan. The birth of the Famiglia Basilischi is a strategic construction rather than a spontaneous aggregation of criminal players. Ontologically, the Famiglia Basilischi is linked to the Calabrian ‘ndrangheta especially for organisational aspects, which makes the Family almost a copycat of the Calabrians. To the Calabrian clans, the Basilischi owe their birth, probably in return for a preferential alliance granted to the Calabrians once the Famiglia was established. The tight links with a stronger group, which acted as mother, as a guarantor, as a business partner and as a competitor all at once, jeopardised the possibility of real independence of the Basilischi. Indeed, when in a given environment there is a group already operational for a while, the relationship between a stronger/older and a weaker/newer group can either be of alliance or of competition. In the case study of the Famiglia Basilischi, the ‘ndrangheta wishes to be an ally – and supports the establishment of the new group – but eventually ends up re-gaining control over the markets. Indeed, as highlighted by Hannan and Freeman (1989: 245) there is a ‘*liability of newness*’ in organisations that attempt to enter a market where other groups are already established. New organisations are more vulnerable and without autonomy/independence it is very difficult to nourish bonds of trust among affiliates that do not necessarily perceive the feeling of belonging to a brand. In dense criminal markets, moreover, new organisations cannot survive the selection process if they are not independent enough to strategically and quickly respond to variations.

### **Competition and niche in the market**

Linked to autonomy and independence of organisations in the environment of reference is the *weight* of competitors in the field. In particular, competition is assessed in terms of *density* and *saturation* of the market – by looking at the *situational mass* of

competitors (which is the weight on the market combined to size and reach of the organisation). A focus on the density and mass of competition is qualitative and much more reliable than a focus on the number of competitors, which, as a quantitative measure, does not capture the real space organisations occupy in the market of choice. Indeed, it is necessary for a newly born organisation to conquer its space in the market. Space in the market could either be a specialist niche of the market or a generalist position if the dimension of the new organisation allows enduring competition and internal/external challenges. In the case of the Famiglia Basilischi, for example, other pre-existing criminal groups dominate the criminal market - thus it is a saturated criminal market - but also these organisations are larger and more competitive. The clans of 'ndrangheta have interests in Basilicata and are also generalist groups; they exploit the international reputation of the brand "ndrangheta" to engage in various types of activities (Paoli 2003; Sergi 2015b; DNA 2014). The activities of the Famiglia Basilischi were strategically random, occasionally supporting/emulating 'ndrangheta or Camorra clans and/or engaging in a number of very different activities. The choice of the Basilischi to specialise in one or more criminal activities might have made a difference for their success among other competitors. The case mentioned before about the strategy of the Casalese clan to specialise early on in environmental crime at the point of monopolising the field is a clear example of this logic.

### **Variations in social and/or criminal structures and external barriers**

Variations, both social and economic, do obviously affect the criminal environment. Factors external to the organisation might hinder as well as support the evolution of the organisation itself. The choices made at the strategic level by the leaders directly impact on the (criminal) market as well as suffering from fluctuations in the criminal market. More specifically, this, for example, can refer to competitors' behaviours as well as to the behaviours of *opponents*, generally intended. In the case of the Famiglia Basilischi, we have seen how judicial (legal) interventions have severely maimed the efficiency of the organisation; arrests and investigations have imposed changes upon the group in terms of recruitment, leaderships and involvement in criminal activities, thus forcing modifications of the original criminal structure. Clearly, every organisation needs to strategically assess the best way to deal with potential risks outside the organisations. In a criminal environment, these risks are indeed linked to the exposure to legal prosecutions as well as the risk of being replaced by others in the criminal market of choice. Variations in the environment - intended as both planned and accidental changes - can lead to mutation in leaderships of criminal associations (as in the case of the Basilischi) as well as increasing the feeling of uncertainty of the market that, according to organisational ecology, is natural to every new organisation. In the first instance, changes in leadership also carry the risk of inadequate and/or unskilled leadership (again, the case of the Basilischi); in the second instance, uncertainty in the market leads to more 'struggle' in devising and executing changes fast enough. This struggle may also lead to ambiguous strategic planning for future (criminal) activities.

## Internal barriers

Alongside external barriers and interferences, it is vital for a criminal organisation to take into consideration internal factors that can predispose the organisation towards failure or success and that are related to staff/members and leadership. In particular, acquiring the right set of skills to improve the position in the market, again, both in terms of staff/members and in terms of leadership, is a fundamental step towards success. The Famiglia Basilischi's approach to leadership, centred around a formal reverence of the boss can be considered a strategic mistake. It was, arguably, a similar mistake to the one made in the late 1980s and early 1990s within Sicilian Cosa Nostra when boss Totò Riina (the boss of the bosses) adopted a very violent and aggressive strategy and could not be challenged by others who opposed his approach, eventually bringing the whole organisation to a deep crisis (Dalla 2010). Indeed, a more flexible approach in terms of leadership (like the one of the 'ndrangheta and the Camorra) might make a difference for smaller, newer organisations.

Moreover, adopting rituals and affiliation rules so resembling to the ones of the Calabrian 'ndrangheta was another mistake for the Basilischi. Arguably, the 'ndrangheta is different in form, size, markets and characters. Adopting a winning model of a pre-existing organisation without 'corrections' that respect the peculiarity of the territory and of the affiliates of the new group is a very naïve move that condemns the newly formed group to failure. Indeed, the aspiration for independence in a criminal group needs to be paired with a strategic plan of interaction among individuals in the group by taking into consideration their specific needs and skills in relation to the environment of reference. The lack of strategic skills and the centralisation of the leadership position can, therefore, represent, not so trivial internal barriers in hindrance of success of a newly born organisation in a competitive market. The inability to overcome the struggle of internal challenges – as well as external – might be a sign of disorganisation, which eventually is detrimental to the reputation of a mafia-group.

## Conclusion

This paper's first aim has been to explore the links between ecological approaches and organised crime. It has advocated the possibility to combine principles from organisational ecology, as a socio-economic approach, and socio-criminological theories on the links between crime and the environment. The paper has analysed data from a number of sources to build a case study on the Famiglia Basilischi, a criminal association from Basilicata, Southern Italy. The case study has been read through frameworks and principles from organisational ecology and classical studies on deviance to build a qualitative analysis on the organisation and/or disorganisation of criminal association. By departing from the events of birth, evolution and death of the Famiglia Basilischi, this work has looked at criminal organisations as groups *in motion* within a certain environment. Such an analysis of criminal groups can be successful in mafia and organised crime studies where research on organisations (from a structural point of view) is often overlooked. It is indeed very useful to understand how logics and rationales normally associated with legitimate organisations can still apply to illegitimate ones. For example, it is necessary to appreciate how illicit groups

move across markets when the market of reference is congested because of more established groups present in the same area and/or market. This can be done by looking at competition among - and evolution of - licit organisations, along the lines explored in this paper. After all, a strict divide between legal and illegal is neither particularly useful nor helpful. In organised crime/mafia settings both criminal skills and social interactions play a huge role in the success of criminal activities; criminal skills and social interactions frame organised crime groups as dynamic. There is a lot to be learned from studies on organisational ecology, which sees organisations as evolving dynamic units in an evolving and dynamic environment.

In conclusion, the case study from Basilicata has allowed to identify an outline for an ecological perspective on criminal groups from a qualitative and interdisciplinary point of view. Data analysis and discussion have proved and confirmed how criminogenic environments, autonomy/independence, competition, variations in structures and internal/external barriers are all factors that can and will influence the way groups act within criminal markets. Also, the way markets react to the establishment of new groups is linked to the characteristics of the criminal environment. This implies that knowledge of other players in the market, the consideration of individual personalities and needs as well as an awareness of social and economic conditions in the environment, play a crucial role in predicting organised criminal strategies and results. While the complexity of relations among all these variables might seem daunting for any analysis that aims to be comprehensive, this paper is an invitation to embrace complexity through a qualitative analysis that, albeit limited in many ways, does aim to stimulate further discussion on the topic.

#### **Compliance with ethical standards**

**Ethical approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Conflict of interest** The Author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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