



Corpses, diehards and clubs: Ultras and organized crime in Italy

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Abstract

This work will be dealing with the relation between football and organized crime in Italy. It will attempt to critically analyse the relations between football and organized crime. Its focus will be on the relation between *ultras*, that is a relevant part of organized supporters, and organized crime. The paper devotes particular attention to a 2017 Report of the Italian Parliamentary Anti-Mafia Commission which deals with the relationship between football and mafia. The analysis of the Anti-mafia Committee Report will help the purpose of de-constructing the assumptions that, firstly, there exists an organic alliance between ultras and organized crime, and, secondly, that this connection provides the ground for an infiltration of football as a business “from below”. Deconstruction will work by analysing the most relevant cases outlined by the Report of the Committee and relating them with the main theories of organised crime. It will thus become evident that there is no such thing as an organic alliance between criminal organisations and the ultras. Moreover, it will be evident that there is not a uniform pattern, but, rather, a difference between various local situations, according to the context.

Keywords Italy · Football · Ultras · Organized Crime · Corruption

Introduction

This work will be dealing with the relation between football and organized crime in Italy. It will attempt to critically analyse the relations between football and organized crime. Its focus will be on the relation between *ultras*, that is a relevant part of organized supporters, and organized crime. The idea underpinning this work is that, despite many sources (UNODC 2021; EUROPOL 2021) emphasise the infiltration of football by criminal organizations through their “dirty money” to be laundered

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into the acquisition of clubs and into the transfer market, these activities are rarely described, investigated and analysed.

Criminal organizations hide themselves behind bogus partners, as well as their power to intimidate, thus making difficult to investigate into such activities as property management and money laundering that take place at the summit of football organizations. Consequently, the activities of investigators, journalists and academics, mostly highlight the illegal facts involving the ultras, both because they are more visible and because they are more targeted and labelled since come from an “outsiders” context (Becker 1963; Ruggiero 2015). In a sort of hierarchy within the criminal agenda, a trend that is also typical of other crimes (Quinney 1977; Whyte 2015), such crimes as touting, violence and counterfeiting of replica kits, are more visible, and easier to be dealt with by the police and the magistrates. Conversely, it is more difficult to investigate into the “white collar crimes” of football (money laundering, property management irregularities, and so on).

This work does not aim at denying the existence of football-related crimes, or the involvement of ultras in the commitment of some of them. The point that I will try to make is that there is a two-tier analysis of the relation between crime and football, as the lower-rank crimes are more emphasised, analysed and prosecuted than the white-collar crimes of football.

The paper devotes particular attention to a 2017 Report of the Italian Parliamentary Anti-Mafia Commission which deals with the relationship between football and mafia. The analysis of the Anti-mafia Committee Report will help the purpose of de-constructing the assumptions that, firstly, there exists an organic alliance between ultras and organized crime, and, secondly, that this connection provides the ground for an infiltration of football as a business “from below”. As football is more and more a business that attracts billionaire investments, the economic power of criminal organizations, as well the networks they operate in (Varese 2011), makes profitable businesses more attractive than touting and counterfeiting. Moreover, the idea of an organic alliance between ultras and mobs, follows the pattern of conspiracy theories (Di Cesare 2021) that have been popular in Italy since the end of World War II, as an explanation of heinous crimes that influenced the political changes occurring in Italian politics.

Deconstruction will work by analysing the most relevant cases outlined by the Report of the Committee and relating them with the main theories of organised crime. It will thus become evident that there is no such thing as an organic alliance between criminal organisations and the ultras. Moreover, it will be evident that there is not a uniform pattern, but, rather, a difference between various local situations, according to the context. We will conclude by highlighting the potentialities of the ultra’s world, as well as by emphasising that it is necessary to put on the spot the connections between legal and illegal actors operating in the domain of finance and business. The need of a reform of football property, marching in the direction of its democratisation will also be supported in the conclusions.

Ultras and the report

Ultras, both because of their working-class background and because of their aggressive and violent attitude, have often been regarded by literature as the outpost of crime in football. While some authors (Elias and Dunning 1986), analyse the football supporter culture as a legacy of the past, some other authors (Taylor 1971), see it as product of a genuine working-class culture, engaging in violent act to oppose the transformation of football into business. Other authors (Meli 2019), endorse the view that ultras, due to their working-class background, provide a fertile ground for right wing ideology infiltration (Jones 2019). This interpretation neglects the fact that the politicization of ultras can be on the other side, that is on the left, as the case of such clubs as Barcelona FC (Spain), Olympique Marseille (France), Athletic Bilbao (Spain), St. Pauli (Germany) and, in Italy, Perugia, Genoa and Livorno, demonstrate (Kennedy 2013).

Moreover, the case of Lazio ultras, described by the author (Meli 2019: 113), is a peculiar one, and will be analysed more in depth in the following pages, as Lazio ultras have been enjoying a long-ranging reputation of being right-wing oriented (Chiappaventi 2018). Finally, the focus of this work is the infiltration of criminal organizations in professional football. Consequently, it is not relevant to consider to our discussion to consider the infiltration of organized crime in local, amateur clubs, like also other authors (Santoro 2017) tend to do. Finally, as I will try to demonstrate in this work, single cases of relation between ultras, members of organized crime, football club owners or managers, are just occasional cases, not the symptom of an organic infiltration of criminal organization into the ultras.

This work will draw on the report of Italian Parliament Anti-Mafia Committee of legislature XVII, that it is the Parliamentary session running from 2013 to 2018. The first Anti-mafia Committee was set up in 1963, after the Ciaculli massacre, when 4 Carabinieri were killed by a bomb exploding from inside a car (Pantaleone 1969). The Committees that were set up in the other legislatures have provided in depth analysis and documents concerning the activities of criminal organizations in Italy. The necessity for the Committee to investigate upon the infiltration of organized crime in football was prompted by the many judicial enquiries on the phenomenon, due to different criminal episodes involving the *ultras*. The Report we will use as our source is the most accurate, as well as the most recent document, about the investigation of Italian Parliament about the relation between organized crime and sport, that had risen the concern of Italian public opinion. Even though the Parliament report dates to 2017, it is the most systematic and document that both describes and analyses the relation between ultras groups and organized crime, providing enough material to develop critical reflections on the topic.

The report develops three angles that will be critically analysed: the first one concerns the relation between the groups of *ultras*, and criminal organization. The second aspect will focus on the relations between organized crime and football clubs. Finally, the third aspect covered by the report concerns the match fixing matters. This paper will argue that football, like any other domain of social life, can be easily infiltrated by criminal organization, and that this can be a peculiar aspect

of Italy, wherein criminal organizations' infiltration in social and economic life by organized crime is more common than in other European countries. On the other hand, as Italian football has more and more been declining (Bellinazzo 2018), as the absence of the Italian team from the last two world cup shows, infiltration can be more limited than it is in other cases. For example, in England, where money laundering has been infiltrating football business for a longer time and in a much more influential way, as both the transfer market and the club ownership demonstrate (Russo 2015, 2020). Finally, the long-term control of such illegal activities as illegal betting, touting and counterfeiting operated by the Camorra can paradoxically end up regulating the illegal market.

Throughout our discussion, the assumption that the legal and illegal world are complimentary to each other (Ruggiero 1996), particularly within a capitalist economy, will provide the theoretical backbone to our points. Consequently, it will be argued that there are different degrees of infiltration, therefore it is not possible to argue about organic alliances between criminal organizations and football clubs or *ultras* groups. The conclusion will be about arguing that criminal infiltration is a consequence of the marginal participation of supporters, either ultras or not, in the management of clubs, as the more football is business oriented, the higher the chances for the infiltration of criminal groups are.

Ultras and criminal groups: an organic alliance?

Ultras, have been typical of football since the last 50 years. Different authors (Marsh et al. 1980; Giulianotti 1993; Dal Lago 1994), have demonstrated how organized supporters and ultras are part of football as a collective ritual, a total social phenomenon, wherein all the social contradictions are reflected. Class identities, ideological differences, local peculiarities, are conveyed through the support of a team. Sport rivalries, by this token, convey deeper social meanings, giving birth to the peculiar subculture of supporters, out of which the ultras' subculture was created. Group organizations, violent confrontations (either apparent or real), are part of this complex and delicate dynamics. Ultras subculture is different, often at odds with mainstream culture, and frequent misunderstanding by the actors of social control can cause the degeneration into violent conflict.

On the other hand, this peculiarity of ultras subculture, might make it possible to other organized groups to infiltrate their spaces and produce an instrumental use of their symbols and subculture. Wearing a scarf of the club, attending all the home and away matches, showing a dedicated attitude to the cause of the team, might be instrumentally used by members of gangs who want to infiltrate the ultras either to control the territory or to make business out of football related issues, such as touting and replica kits. The report of the Italian Parliament Committee mentions the "Mafioso method" adopted by the ultras (Commissione Parlamentare di Inchiesta 2017: 12). In other words, ultras would use their organization and their long-time patrol of the territory to devolve their activities to the illegal domain. To support its thesis, the

Committee argues that many leaders of the ultras have a “serious criminal record”, although not specifying the kind of serious crimes they were convicted for.

Moreover, the report neglects the complexity of the ultras’ sub-culture, as a multi-faceted phenomenon: aside those who set up a group for mere supporting, there are those who are members of a group for political reasons, as well as those ones who are not members of any organization at all but enjoy being part of the choreographic context of chanting and screaming supporters. What the Mafioso method consists of is unclear, as the reports mentions some judicial cases involving such football clubs as Juventus, Lazio, Genoa, Napoli, Latina, Catania, who play in different league and have experienced different cases of infiltration.

The initial statement about ultras patrolling specific sections of stadia, controlling the replica kits market, involved in touting and in drug dealing, is a general statement, including the activities ultras group, but not *all* the ultras’ groups do. Firstly, because there are different peculiarities for each local context. Secondly, because, if on the one hand it is true that some criminal organizations have relations with some ultra’s groups, this is *not* true for every group and there is no such thing as an organic alliance, but rather a functional exchange.

The relationship between the ultras and organized crime, as described and analysed by the Committee report, follows at least three patterns: the first is the *spatial* dimension, that is the one related to local contexts: in other words, the more a criminal organization is related in a context, the higher the chances to have relations with ultras groups are. The second pattern, that is the *gain dimension*, concerns the profitability of the business: organised crime tries to take advantage of infiltrating those clubs who have a wide array of supporters (not necessarily ultras) and, for this reason, can make it possible to make profits out of touting, selling replica kits. The third pattern, that is the *topophilia* dimension (Bale in De Biasi 2008), as an articulation of the second, relates to the control of territory, that is those parts of the stadia ultras stay in. This latter pattern concerns the relations between extreme right groups and ultras, as well as those criminal gangs whose aim is that of engaging in illegal activities, such as selling drugs. Throughout the discussion it will become possible to outline the different range of extension of infiltration.

The Spatial dimension. How does organized crime operate?

To develop this section, it is necessary to outline a distinction between *traditional* and *non-traditional areas* in relation to the presence of criminal organizations in a due territory, as outlined by Rocco Sciarrone (2001). The former definition refers to the areas wherein criminal organizations develop. In the Italian case, traditional areas refer to Sicily for the mafia, Campania for the camorra and Calabria for the ‘ndrangheta. The Parliament report focuses on two cases about traditional areas: one concerns Catania, in Sicily; the other one is about the activities of the camorra, in Naples. The Catania case concerns two different kinds of criminal activities: one relates to the conflict between the ultras and the police forces, that reached its peak on the 2nd of February 2007, when the police officer Filippo Raciti died during the

clashes between Catania FC and US Palermo ultras before the derby match opposing the two most popular Sicilian teams. The controversial trial, ending with the conviction of the Catania FC ultras Antonio Speziale (Scifo 2022) who still claims his innocence after 15 years, boosted the attention of investigators on the milieu of the Catania FC ultras. The outcome of the investigation proved to be quite unfruitful in relation to the infiltration of Cosa Nostra among the Catanese ultras. On the one hand, two of the ultras' leaders, Rosario Piacenti and Stefano Africano, are members of the Cosa Nostra clan *Cursoti*, and they used their position to force the club's skipper, Marco Biagiante, to give financial support to the families of the incarcerated Mafioso. Despite Biagiante, probably under fear of retaliation, denied the fact, arguing he was asked to support the stadium choreography, Piacenti and Africano were convicted in 2016 for the crime of extortion (Live Sicilia 2016). On the other hand, this is the only case with evidence of relations between Cosa Nostra and the Catania FC ultras. Other minor cases described in the report hint at some Catania FC ultras accepting to hide weapons and drugs as a favour to Cosa Nostra members.

These two episodes don't tell us much about the infiltration of the mafia among the Catania ultras. The blackmailing episode against Biagiante appears to be a peculiar case, not evidencing an activity of infiltration by the mafia in the world of football. Probably the two Mafioso used their passion for football, as well as their prominence as ultra's leaders, to approach Biagiante, using their position of both mafia members and prominent ultras exponent to extort him money. Their responsibility, though, was immediately ascertained, proving that Cosa Nostra does not enjoy either a protection network or a generalized consent inside the milieu of the ultras. Investigations have not shown any mafia hegemony on the Catania ultras.

The mention by the Report of ultras accepting to hide drugs and weapons must be assessed under the light of individual cases, rather than as the consequence of a criminal network-related activity. Moreover, in the case of Cosa Nostra in Catania (Mannoia and Scalia 2008); we are not dealing with a top-bottom, selective and articulated organization. Catania clans, unlike their Palermo partners, work closely with street robbers and pushers, thus causing a high rate of juvenile crime. Some of the ultras involved in these activities might have been involved in street crimes as well as being involved in ultras' groups, so that their illegal activities are not immediately related to football.

Finally, if we follow what Rocco Sciarrone argues (2001), criminal organizations in traditional areas rely on strong ties, that is close knit relations such as those that develop in family, friendship and neighbourhood context. Consequently, some ultras members, though not being directly involved in criminal activities, might feel to have a moral obligation towards some of their friends or relatives who are part of mafia organizations, or, like the skipper of the Catania FC, they are afraid of intimidation.

Things look different in the case of Naples. Unlike Catania FC, only rarely playing in Serie A, Naples SSC, re-founded in 2004, after a financial collapse, is one of the most prestigious football clubs in Italy, winning the Serie A twice (1987 and 1990) as well as one Uefa Cup (1989). Secondly, Naples is one of the biggest

metropolitan areas in Europe, with almost 5 million inhabitants (Indovina 2014), the biggest in Southern Italy, as well as economically prominent. Because of this, there is a wider range of economic interests that might develop around football as a business. Despite this, the Committee report points more at the infiltration of ultras by the camorra than at profits. In relation to spatiality, though, there is an unclear overlapping between the camorra clans and the *ultras* groups. Since the beginning, the Committee, basing its statements on the declaration of Antonio Lo Russo, a former camorra member who turned informer, argues about “a blatant overlapping between the camorra clans and the ultras”, though distinguishing between the members of criminal organization and the football ultras.

The Committee report even admits that “the camorra members, when they go to the stadium, mainly go to support SSC Naples”, although the division of Curva A (End A) and Curva B (End B) between groups of ultras belonging to different areas of Naples, as well as to different camorra clans, is eventually emphasised. Like in the case of Catania, the connection between the camorra clans and the ultras group is not specified. If camorra and ultras overlapped, there would be a clear depiction of both the clan’s and the club’s internal hierarchies. The Committee has not got such evidence, also because, as many authors have pointed out (Castellano 2004; Braccaccio 2008), the camorra has not a centralized structure, but rather a fragmented organization, based on the charismatic leadership of the most prominent members, never formalized.

Another aspect concerns what Richard Giulianotti and Alessandro Dal Lago (1993: 176; 1994: 18) argue, following Erving Goffman’s scheme, when they depict the stadium as an independent symbolic frame, laden with its own meaning and sense, conveying all the social and the political contradictions (Bromberger 1993). Consequently, power relations inside the Naples stadium are shaped by the organization of ultras, although such contradictions as unemployment, marginality, involvement in criminal context filter the ultras ‘context social composition.

The Committee report mentions the case of Gennaro De Tommaso, an SSC Napoli ultras leader known by his nickname *Genny ‘a Carogna* (Genny the Corpse). De Tommaso was involved in the clashes between Naples and Fiorentina ultras during the Coppa Italia (Italian Football League) final of 2014 (3rd of May). The Committee points at the criminal record, both of De Tommaso and of his family. The De Tommaso family is labelled as a camorra group because of his father’s convictions for money laundering, loansharking and drug dealing. Once again, this definition is flawed, as well not proving the control of the ultras group by the camorra. Firstly, as penal responsibility is individual, it is not possible to state that De Tommaso is a member of the camorra because his parents and relatives are. He has a record, but, like the member of his family, he has no conviction for being members of a criminal organization, a crime that in Italy is sanctioned under the article 416 bis of penal laws. By this token, it is not possible to sanction as camorra members either De Tommaso or his family. One might argue that, as the Camorra is a fluid organization, devoid of any formal and vertical organization, the borders between members and non-members are blurred. In this case, though, the distinction between members and non-members should be made clearer. Moreover, in relation to our purposes, all

the connection between the Camorra and the ultras are focused on De Tommaso and his shirt requiring the liberation of Antonino Speziale, which does not provide any evidence about the ultras-camorra connection.

Another aspect concerns the kind of relation between the two actors. On the one hand it is very likely that some camorra members, since they support SSC Napoli, are involved with the activities of the ultras. On the other hand, not all the ultras are camorra members, and, for criminal organizations, only some specific activities, in the domain of football, such as selling drugs, touting, counterfeiting of replica kits, are profitable. These activities, though, can be run outside the stadium, without the support of ultras groups.

The relations between the legal and the “illegal” or “informal” world, that is the relations between the ultras and the criminal organizations on the one hand, and the club and the players on the other hand also need to be analysed. It will thus become possible to find out the existence of a sophisticated relation of intermediation between the ultras, the players and the mobs. The case of the Argentine player Ezequiel “El Pocho” (the lightning) Lavezzi, who played for SSC Napoli from 2007 to 2012, is a good example of it. Lavezzi was supposed to change team, as his performances with SSC Napoli had increased his value and reputation within the football market. Other clubs, such as historical Northern Italian rivals of Napoli, Juventus, Inter Milan, AC Milan, had set their eyes on *El Pocho*. The rumours circulating about Lavezzi moving northward made all the Naples’ supporters uneasy, and a section of the ultras, those based in Curva B, started booing Lavezzi, who felt uncomfortable, as well as scared about his and his family’s safety.

To find a way out, Lavezzi decided to contact Lo Russo, who contacted a prominent camorra member (the name of whom Lo Russo would not reveal), to make the two ends of the stadium where ultras traditionally locate (Curva A and Curva B) express their solidarity to Lavezzi, thus bridging the traditional divisions between the ultras. The initiative proved successful, as El Pocho promised he would have never left SSC Napoli for another Italian club, a promise he eventually fulfilled, as in 2012 Paris Saint Germain, a French club, signed Lavezzi.

The case of Lavezzi, makes room for relevant reflections. Firstly, Camorra and ultras are distinct domains. Ultras are divided, for support-related and territorial reasons, between the two ends of the stadium. Even though some camorra members are also ultras, they follow the conflict pattern related to football, rather than the adapting themselves to the rifts within the local criminal organizations. Despite conflicts exist between the different Camorra clans, they are not the same as those ones existing between the ultra’s groups.

On the contrary, and this is the second point, when it becomes necessary to support a prominent player of the club, Camorra plays a mediation role, operating as an external actor, in a similar pattern as that of Palermo. A judicial investigation (Tribunale di Palermo 2017) showed that Cosa Nostra, in the Sicilian Capital, operated to end the conflicts between ultras and establish a mutual agreement about the patrol of the territory (that is the Stadium). In this case, unlike Palermo, the Camorra intervenes to establish a temporary peace under the request of Lavezzi and the

intermediation of a ultra's leader with good connection within the criminal world. It is a contingent, specific case, but the camorra clans accept to agree and, more than this, to promote agreement between the ultras.

The role of violent brokers, as described by authors long time ago, keeps being a specific function of criminal organization, who play it to grant themselves a reputation and a privileged position in the patrol of the territory, making up a parallel power to that of the State. Thirdly, the control of the territory by the camorra is legitimized by the different actors that operate in the frame of football. Despite the president of SSC Napoli, De Laurentiis, in answering the Committee's question, firmly denies any contact with the ultras (*do you want us to talk to Genny the Corpse?* Antonio Lo Russo himself has admitted to the fact that he had a position inside the club, who had hired him as a gardener and a steward. It was Lo Russo, as an ultras and minor camorra member, to suggest the Napoli skipper, Marek Ham-sik, to talk to De Tommaso during the Coppa Italia final of 2014 to stop the protests by the SSC Napoli ultras after the killing of one of them by a Roma supporter.

Criminal organisations, in traditional areas, appear to operate in different ways, according to the size of the club and the interests at stake. Whereas there is not an organic alliance between organised crime and ultras, there are though different levels of intermediations: one the one hand, ultras wield a spatial hegemony on the stadium, also influencing the interests of the club. On the other hand, both the actors, denote the need of a third, external mediator, to accommodate any potential or effective conflict, both between the ultras and between the latter and the club management. In the case of Naples, the camorra has not a real interest in controlling the ultras, because they engage in violent act from time to time, and police repression, if the paramilitary structures coincided, would mean a repression and dismantling of the Camorra. A similar consideration can be made in the case of Catania, as both cities have a similar model of criminal organisation, though the Catania Cosa Nostra, in its summits, has a hierarchical organization. On the other hand, in both cases, one can see how criminal organizations have a firm grasp of the territory, that they either work as brokers or extort money to players.

Criminal organisations, in Catania and Naples, that is traditional areas, operate by using the intermediation of one of their members, persons who live in their district, or members of families with criminal connection, to infiltrate either the club (like in the case of Lo Russo) or the ultras. Their purpose is not that of having a firm grasp of either the ultras or of the club, but rather to dispose of someone who overlooks the context, so that they watch what happens and can intervene if necessary. In traditional areas, the firm grasp of the territory, does not require many efforts. Situations are different in non-traditional areas, as we will see in the next session.

Profitable and recruit-able: Mobs, clubs and ultras in non-traditional areas

Criminal organisations have a different, situated approach to the domain of football, both in relation to business and with the ultra's context. Whereas in traditional areas

the matter of territory control makes up a crucial point, in non-traditional environments we face a different context, more business-oriented, with the presence of the Calabrian 'ndrangheta, like in the case of Turin.

Many authors (Ciconte 1999; Sergi and Lavorgna 2016) have analysed the 'ndrangheta in depth, emphasizing its skills to develop its business outside Calabria. Probably, in the case of football, 'ndrangheta must move outside traditional areas because of the Calabria peculiarity in relation to football. Whereas Sicily and Campania have big cities like Palermo, Messina and Catania, or big metropolitan areas like Naples, this is not the Calabrian case. Three Calabrian clubs, Reggina, Crotone and Catanzaro, have reached Serie A in recent years. Despite this, their supporters are limited to the local range, and to the Calabrian communities abroad, but do not provide a wide local range of supporters. Consequently, this could be the reason why the 'ndrangheta targets those football activities outside Calabria and is mainly focused on making profits rather than on controlling the territory.

Other authors, have analysed how criminal organizations, mainly the camorra and the 'ndrangheta, control touting, illegal betting and replica kits. Both literature and investigation, though, have showed that the 'ndrangheta has marginal interests in the domain of football. So, it is more likely that the relations between the Calabrian mob and the Juventus ultras are a consequence both of migration of Calabrian people to Piedmont and Northern Italy since 1950s and to the settlement of 'ndrangheta members in these areas because of confinement. This paper, as is being based on the Parliamentary Committee Report, and focused on the relational level rather than on the nature of business, will give a hint at those activities.

The Report focuses on the infiltration of Juventus ultras by the 'ndrangheta. Unlike in the south, where close knit ties, such as family, neighbourhood and friendship ties are widespread enough, criminal groups operating in Northern Italy must find other ways to infiltrate ultras. One of these ways is that of founding a Juventus club in Calabria, so that two of the representatives of 'ndrangheta in Turin, Rocco Dominello and Andrea Germani, can ask one of the most prominent ultras leaders, Andrea Grancini, the permission for the members of the new ultras group to occupy a piece of the *Curva Scirea* (Scirea End, the area of the Juventus Stadium where Juve ultras congregate). Once they get a positive response, it becomes possible to attempt to establish a *protectorate* on the ultras, as the Committee defines it. Indeed, it is more than this, as the aim of the mobs is that of taking over both the touting and the replica kit businesses, which the ultras have been running on their own up to that moment (2017).

The Calabrian mobs, unlike in the south, work their way among the Juventus ultras through the criminal milieu. Grancini, alongside with other prominent Juve ultras, have criminal records for various crimes, such as drug dealing, extortion and attempted homicide. Dominello, though, does not follow the illegal path to approach Grancini, as it is his friend, Fabio Germani, a Juventus club leader without a criminal record, to facilitate the connection between the 'ndrangheta and the ultras. It is a kind of relation that resembles the functional side of social capital, that is the weak ties James Coleman (1988) argues about.

'Ndrangheta does not aim at controlling the ultras; its main purpose is that of taking over the ticket and replica kit related business; for this reason, the

Calabrian mobs, “disguise” as ultras and look for a connection without criminal record, that Germani provides. Once this attempt has proved successful, Dominello moves to the second stage of his plan, that is the establishment of a direct relation with the club management to obtain the tickets and the permission to sell the replica kits. It is Germani to put him in touch with Alessandro D’Angelo, Support Liaison Officer (SLO) of the club, and Stefano Merulla, head of security. It is thus possible for Dominello to credit himself as a ultra’s leader, able to prevent disorders, to mediate between the club and the ultras, and to obtain economic advantages for his business. Turin magistrates will bring this sophisticated criminal connection to light, to dismantle this business. Andrea Agnelli, the then president of Juventus, will be acquitted, along with Merulla and D’Angelo, from the charge of complicity with the ‘ndrangheta, as all of them will tell the magistrates they were not aware of the kind of business Dominello and Germani operated in, as well as being unaware of the criminal milieu the former grew up in.

The acquittal of the Juventus management left part of public opinion perplexed, because, on the one hand, the sophisticated network we just discussed about makes it possible to believe them. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that both the SLO and the Head of Security of the most popular Italian football club, who are supposed to have a good grasp upon the supporter environment, were totally unaware of who they were dealing with. They probably knew, but just wanted to avoid any trouble to the club, and the president approved of their *modus operandi* in order to avoid any major problem in other domains, as Juventus is owned by the FIAT corporation, whose interests range from the production of cars to public construction and operates in Calabria.

Agnelli might have accepted the presence of the ‘ndrangheta because of his underrating of the danger, as the Committee argues. Another possibility could be that he feared the intimidating potential of the mob, like in the case of Lazio president, Claudio Lotito.

The other relevant case the Committee has investigated about, concerns the relation between the second club of Rome, that is Lazio, and the *Irriducibili* (Diehards), probably the biggest group of Lazio ultras (Meli 2019: 108). This latter case is extremely different from the others discussed in this work, because the structure of the organised supporter group covers a network of criminal activities, ranging from the neo-Nazi militancy to drug trafficking, involving the main leaders of the *Irriducibili*. The most famous of them, Fabrizio Piscitelli, more famous under the nickname of *Diabolik*, was killed by a hitman in a Rome Park on the 7th of August 2019. The investigation of Rome attorney, *Grande Raccordo Criminale* (Great Criminal Junction, Tribunale di Roma 2019), proved that Piscitelli was part of a wide criminal network, involving the former neo-Nazi member Massimo Carminati, currently one of the main criminal leaders of Rome mob, the Neapolitan Camorra and a group of Albanian gangsters. Piscitelli worked for the Senese camorra clan, operating in Rome in the domain of drug trafficking, loansharking and weapon trafficking. One of his “deputies”, Marco Turchetta, as well as being caught red-handed with drugs in his car, had also been arrested and sentenced because of its leadership of the neo-Nazi *Movimento Politico Occidentale* (Western Political Movement) group. Another

one, Paolo Toffolo, had faced similar charges and sentences (Meli 2019: 119). The *Irriducibili* were indeed a paramilitary structure, patrolling the *Curva Nord* (North End) of the Olympic Stadium, the stronghold of Lazio ultras, to recruit new militants, sell drugs and run football related business, such as touting and replica kits. In 2012, president Lotito, had decided to stop granting tickets to the *Irriducibili*, and that the shops selling Lazio replica kits and gadgets had to be selected through a public competition (Commissione Parlamentare di Inchiesta 2017: 46). The decision met the hostility of the *Irriducibili*, who mobilized the *Curva Nord* in a systematic protest and tried to involve the rest of the ultras. The president of the club tried to stand by the opposition at the beginning, but eventually accepted that the *Irriducibili* maintained the replica kit and gadget business, as well as granting them the free tickets that are eventually sold in touting business.

In 2017, when the Italian Football Association sanctioned the closure of the *Curva Nord* for racist behaviour, Lotito decided to sell tickets of the other End, that is the *Curva Sud*, for one euro, so as to allow those ultras who were banned from the stadium after the decision of the Football Association, to see the match (Meli 2019: 123). After the death of Piscitelli and the criminal investigations about the *Irriducibili* leaders, the group was dismantled to be re-founded under the new name of *Ultras Lazio*.

The case of Lazio is different from that of the other teams. Whereas in Catania, in Naples and in Turin (Juventus side) one can find a limited power of the ultras, as well as a distinction between them and organized crime, in this last case one faces a coincidence of right wing, ultras and organized crime. The Lazio case can be considered as a negative ideal type, as it embodies all the risks the Italian Parliament Committee foresees ultras might connect with mobs and right-wing groups, and thus grow a paramilitary structure that would threaten football. There is a gap between this dominant representation of the ultra's world and the reality, as this paper has been trying to demonstrate. Probably, it is due to the drive towards the transformation of football into business, that rejects football as a mass phenomenon to tame it up for global profit. Or there are other aspects of crime to investigate upon, in relation to football.

Conclusions

There is no such thing as a coincidence between ultras and organized crime. As we have discussed and demonstrated throughout this paper, there are different kind of relations between ultras and criminal organizations. Such relations are fluid, and their density and duration depend upon the local context, the attitude of clubs, the interests of criminal organizations. Only in one case, that of Lazio, one can find an organic relation between the mobs and the ultras, but it is a peculiar situation, due to the criminal activities run by the far-right militants who controlled the *Irriducibili*.

On the one hand, the ultras reflect the political and social tensions of the local reality they operate in. Moreover, they are organized, and inevitably start developing a paramilitary force (De Biasi 2008: 46). On the other hand, they are a mass phenomenon, producing original subcultures who have a potential to convey collective messages that could be exploited in a better way. There are some isolated cases with Barcelona FC, Marseille FC, Sankt Pauli FC. There was an attempt to carry out a

Progetto Ultrà (Ultrà Project) in Italy, involving some civil society organizations, such as ARCI, a few football clubs and local administration.

The development of the Ultrà Project has come to a stall in late years, due to lack of resources, as well to a political choice to target the ultras as the evil side of Italian football. Why this? Probably because ultras convey mass support, impeding the transformation of Italian football into a business. In order to build new stadia, without any fence, with families enjoying the pre and post-match scene and the match becoming an excuse to eat, sleep, shop and visit the museum inside the stadium, it is necessary to get rid of the ultras. Moreover, building new stadia, would be the excuse to carry on projects of urban regeneration and development. The ultras are a serious obstacle to this plan, so that both the Parliament and the clubs draw on the moral panic they rise to attempt to expel organized supporters, either ultras or not, from football venues.

Another reason could be that of using ultras as a scapegoat to hide all the problems affecting Italian football. What used to be one of the most prestigious federations in the world, winning both club and international competition, is currently struggling with two consecutive exclusions from the FIFA World Cup (2018 and 2022), as well as with financial deficit. Moreover, many Italian clubs, in these late years, have changed property: half of the clubs playing in Serie A are now in the hands of foreign investors, mostly Americans, but it is hard to trace back the origin of their money. An Italian American business lawyer is behind most of these purchases. He has been either the president or the CEO of a few teams in these late years, but nobody has ever attempt to investigate in his activities. His case in probably the most outstanding to be mentioned. Aside club purchases, other major issues are made up by doping and match fixing, activities that are far more profitable than touting and the selling of replica kits but have rarely been properly investigated.

A regeneration of Italian football is necessary. To achieve it, thorough investigations into white collar crimes are needed. Of course, also ultras would need to be cleared of any criminal temptation, but one cannot help considering that football is a mass sport and cannot carry one without the active support of its fans. For this reason, a serious democratization process, involving both the ultras and the other supporters in a more active participation in property, management and other decision, might be the necessary step to take, to do away with restricted decision process involving managers, owners, ultras leaders and bosses. A wider control from below could help restricting corruption. But first, of course, let the ball roll.

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Declarations

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The research did not involve any animal.

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