

Universities in the fight against mafias

Research, teaching and training

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University of Cassino and another, which appeared in the journal *Meridiana* in 2013, the result of a doctoral thesis defended at the University of Pisa in 2014, but not listed in the registry because the author does not work in academia yet. Another subject still awaiting further study is the history of prison institutions, which is known to play a crucial role in the formation of criminal networks and in individual careers; however, prison appears only once in the collected titles, a fact that seems to indicate a deficiency in the body of studies here analysed.

7. *Political science**

Political science and mafias: a premise

There are several overlapping areas between political science and research on mafias and criminal organisations, having different analytical scopes. The overarching goal of political science is to develop knowledge about the multiple aspects of political reality; that is why within the confines of the discipline different epistemic needs can engender attention towards mafia and criminal groups.

First, research can focus on the relationship between mafia and politics, on the one hand considering resources and strategies that criminal parties undertake, with varying degrees of success, in their attempts to influence the outcome of public policies and decision-making processes, selection of politicians and government members, outcome of elections, political identification processes and party affiliation. On the other hand, conversely, political science contributes to our understanding of the modalities applied by political and institutional actors to formulate and implement policies aimed at preventing and countering organised crime, affecting its operational capabilities. Thus, causal interdependencies and interactions come into play between the actions of mafia organisations and the ‘three faces’ of institutional politics, i.e., policy, politics and polity. It is significant that the founding father of Italian political science himself, Gaetano Mosca, was the author of the work published in 1900 titled *Che cos’è la mafia* (‘What is the mafia?’). In this book, building on the first ‘notable homicide’ attributable to Cosa Nostra, namely the murder of Emanuele Notarbartolo, Mosca highlighted the link between criminal organisations – described as «unhonoura-

* This paper has been written by Alberto Vannucci.

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ble associations» – and the «yellow-gloved mafia» of ruling classes, ante-litteram devoting attention to what would later be termed ‘grey area’ or ‘grey zone’⁹⁴.

From another point of view, the analytical interest of political science can be directed towards mafia-type associations as ‘political subjects’ per se, that is, as organisational entities capable of exercising forms of dominance and authority within a territory and a community, of instilling loyalty and promoting (as well as exploiting) subcultural models in the population, therefore generating ‘an authoritative allocation of value’ accepted as binding by a large portion of society’s components. This is precisely the distinctive feature of the political process according to Easton’s famous definition⁹⁵. Both in its opposition to the state and in its search for areas of possible symbiosis and collusion with public powers, the mafia is in fact an expression of a personalistic power strategically aiming at affirming and consolidating itself also by manipulating – more or less consciously and intentionally – linguistic, symbolic and communicative codes. Moreover, in this respect it is similar to modern states, whose darker sides and potentially criminal dimensions has been analytically emphasised by political science. The intrinsically ‘political’ nature of mafia was indeed grasped by historian Charles Tilly, and addressed in an essay in which the process of creation and institutionalisation of nation states is likened to the evolution of forms of organised crime. The former and the latter are indistinguishable from an analytical point of view, unless one resorts to slippery notions like ‘legitimacy’, or to their respective ‘scales of activity’⁹⁶.

Thus, the immediate political value of the analysis of mafia organisations can be understood: in the relations they weave at each level of the political and social system, as well as among its members, what ultimately comes into play is a governance structure of social, economic and political relations, through which access to particularistic forms of security and protection of individual demands and expectations is arbitrarily granted or denied. The same analytical approach is applied by a strand of literature which identifies as a distinctive element of mafia activities the peculiar nature of the protection services provided, which safeguard ‘fragile’ property rights that are at stake in interpersonal relationships and economic trans-

⁹⁴ G. Mosca, *Che cos’è la mafia*, in ‘Giornale degli economisti’, XX, 1900, pp. 236-62.

⁹⁵ D. Easton, *The political system: an inquiry into the state of political science*, Knopf, New York 1953.

⁹⁶ C. Tilly, *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*, in P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol (ed.), *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, pp. 169-91.

actions, especially in ‘troublesome’ arenas – as illegal markets typically are⁹⁷. This perspective is consistent with a widespread representation of mafia in public discourse and in the media, as well as in specialist literature, where mafia is sometimes labelled as an ‘anti-state’, or a ‘state within the state’, capable of contending with the state for the «monopoly of physical coercion» and enforcement activities in the regulation of social life and dispute settlement, thus interfering with and overlapping the state’s essential political functions in a Weberian sense⁹⁸.

Research on mafias in Italian political science: numerical evolution

The chapter hereafter concerns political science intended as a wider academic area which includes related disciplines like Political philosophy, History of political thought, History of political institutions, History of international relations. This area counts 100 publications, which means it ranks sixth in Italy by number of research products addressing mafia, at a considerable distance from the disciplinary areas that are ranked higher. In fact, its contributions are a third of those belonging to the history field, which ranks fifth, and merely a tenth of contributions from the sociology area, the one with the most contributions by far. Considering only the specific academic discipline SPS/04, Political science, the products are 87.

Table 9. Distribution of products by academic discipline

Author: discipline	
SPS/04 Political science	87
SPS /02 History of political thought	6
SPS /03 History of political institutions	4
SPS /06 History of international relations	2
SPS /01 Political philosophy	1
Total	100

⁹⁷ Among others, see C. Lane, *Venice and History*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1966; D. Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia* cit.; Y. Barzel, *A Theory of the State*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002.

⁹⁸ “A compulsory political organization with continuous operations will be called a ‘state’ if and insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds a claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order”. M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Mohr, Tübingen 1922.

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Chronologically, the interest of political scientists towards mafias and criminal organisations rose relatively late, although it is currently growing. The database obtained from the research registry covers only the 2000-2018 period; nonetheless, two contributions which appeared in the 80s are worth mentioning. The subject seems to enter the discipline's field of attention with continuity in 1994, meaningfully, during the period when Italian mafias were challenging democratic institutions. The trend is fluctuating, as could be expected given the limited numbers involved, with a peak of 16 publications in 2010. However, a clear upward trend appears detectable, confirming some encouraging signs of scientific interest in a long-neglected topic: between 2000 and 2009 the annual average was 3.4 publications, while between 2010 and 2018 it was 5.5 (see figure 21).

Temporal distribution – political science (2000-2018)

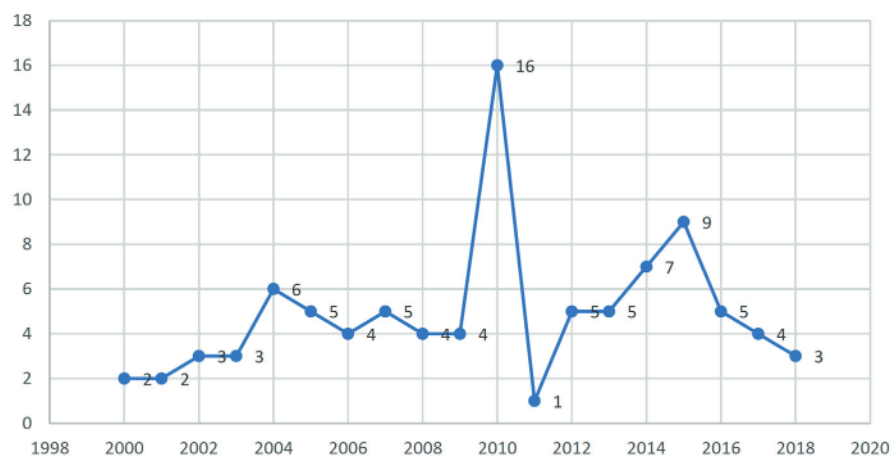


Figure 21. Temporal distribution of publications.

Almost half of the works published by political scientists (47.9%) were written by scholars working in Southern Italy universities, a trend that can also be observed in other areas, albeit to a lesser extent here. In fact, only sociology has a lower value than political science.

The Sicilian universities produced no less than 42 contributions (29 from Catania, 9 from Palermo, 4 from Messina), followed by Tuscan universities with 21 (11 from Pisa, 9 from the 'Scuola S. Anna' in Pisa, 1 from Florence), then the Piedmont universities with 12 (all from Turin).

Among the 17 scholars who have addressed the subjects at hand, 5 work in universities in Sicily, 4 in Tuscany, 2 in Piedmont and Veneto. A research interest usually arises from a dissonance, an anomaly, 'something that does not fit' concerning a socially relevant and theoretically significant fact or phenomenon; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the scholars working in universities situated in territories that are in closer contact with traditional areas of mafia presence and activity have developed more frequent 'inquisitiveness', expressed in terms of research questions. On the other hand, the 'mafia issue' has certainly become a subject of national importance, also in relation to its murky intersections and effects on the functioning of the political system, at least since the dramatic events that led to the approval of the Rognoni-La Torre law in 1982, later with the Palermo Maxi Trial, and then with the dramatic period of massacres and mafia terrorist activity in the early 1990s. After all, the consolidated capacity for mafia to migrate, infiltrate and colonise areas and territories in central and northern Italy, which had been underway for decades before being confirmed by wide-ranging judicial enquiries such as *Crimine-Infinito*, *Minotauro* and *Aemilia*, have led to a country-wide awareness of the importance of an in-depth understanding of the interconnections between mafia-like criminal organisations and the political sphere at every level, especially in local administrations.

Comparing the different types of research products, political science has the highest proportion of contributions consisting of essays in books: 47% of the total. Articles in journals, which account for 34% of the total, are in line with the general average, while the proportion of monographs is lower, at only 5%.

Considering this figure as an indicator of the breadth and depth of the corresponding research effort, the implication is that analytical contributions in this field are relatively fragmented. Political science does not show any significant divergence from the national average of the other areas when it comes to the distribution of publications by author qualification. Nonetheless, the absence of younger contributors is noteworthy: in fact, there are no products written by research assistants or PhD students. The gender distribution of scientific production in the 1999-2018 period shows that political science is the most gender balanced area: 56% for males, 44% for females.

Moreover, political science is second only to economics in the degree of internationalisation of the scientific production analysed here: more than half of the publications, 53.5% to be exact, are in fact published in English or other languages. This is almost double the general average of 27%. Italian political scientists also tend to have a broader outlook in dealing with and examining

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topics that often relate to the realities of domestic criminal organisations and illegal markets, thus opening up to an international scientific debate. In this field, only 26.2% of publications have more than one author, compared to 73.7% by a single author. This figure falls below the average, which – leaving aside the methodological and ‘organisational’ specificities typical of each discipline – could support the thesis that within the confines of political science the various research strands on mafias and criminal organisations are still relatively isolated.

Research on mafias in Italian political science: the main strands of analysis

Although moving within a “highest common denominator” defined by the boundaries of the single disciplinary field, the contributions of political scientists who have faced the methodological and epistemological challenge of studying an elusive and multidimensional ‘object’ such as mafias and organised crime are characterised by a marked heterogeneity of the corresponding research trajectories. Alongside the extremely simplified macro-distinction between ‘mafias and politics’ and ‘mafia as politics’ referred to in the introduction, there are several interpretative frameworks – from rational choice to neo-institutionalism, from culturalist approaches to systemic theory, etc. – that have been applied in the analysis of mafias and organised crime. This in line with the nature of the discipline, which consists of multiple paradigms. The most significant methodological divide is between the economic and the sociological, or rather ‘culturalist’, approaches. The first perspective emphasises the centrality of social actors – thus including mafia members in this specific case – construed as agents endowed with a coherent set of preferences and capable of rationally pursuing, through a maximising calculation, strategies and objectives (mainly concerning income and power) identifiable by the scholar. The second line of studies, on the other hand, traces the explanation of mafia activity, and its social and cultural representations, to a range of causative factors that mainly include macro variables such as social norms, cultural models, socialisation processes, interpretation codes, and mechanisms of symbolic production.

As regards the object of research interest, the scientific products of political scientists can be attributed to at least five main strands. A first, very small series of works focuses on rereading and critically reinterpreting some of the ‘classics’ on the subject.

A large body of work focuses on the interactions between criminal and mafia groups and the political system, as well as on the distortions that result from these interactions. This line of research reveals a variety of approaches: network

analysis, social capital theory, rational choice, neo-institutionalism, etc. It also focuses on several contexts, ranging from case studies to comparative analysis, with greater or lesser tendency towards generalisations. In terms of geographical area, the authors mainly focus on the traditional Southern Italy mafia strongholds, but there are also detailed studies on the Northern Italy areas subject to mafia migration, and on criminal groups in other countries and continents, such as the Balkans, Africa and Latin America. Some of the contributions also focus in depth on the link between the activities of mafia organisations and other potential pathologies of the political system, such as violence and terrorism, clientelism, irregular financing of politics and corruption.

Another subset of works, adjacent to the previous one, more directly links studies on organised crime and mafias to the issue of regional and global security, with a particular focus on the consequences in terms of violent threats to the stability of political institutions and the survival of the rule of law – especially in weaker states, up to extreme cases of ‘failed states’ – looking especially at the scale of operations of transnational criminal organisations.

The intrinsically political dimension of the mafia phenomenon is the central theme in another group of works, in which the similarities and divergences between criminal organisations, the functions of state political institutions, and the logic and strategies of actors operating in the market are examined in comparative terms. This is perhaps the highest point on the ‘scale of abstraction’ that can be reached by the conceptualisation of criminal organisations, thus broadening the scope of said conceptualisation and increasing its ability to ‘travel’, through time as well, in search of explanatory models and analytical generalisations⁹⁹. Among other things, analytical insights come into play concerning the nature of ‘mafia sovereignty’ and its sources of legitimacy, criminal strategies for the control of markets – especially illegal ones – and of social relations, and the organisational structures and dynamics of mafia gangs.

A further set of studies and publications, limited in number yet valuable, deal with the topic of fighting mafias and organised crime from a policy perspective, reviewing regulations, policy tools, institutions, and actors involved, both at Italian and international level, especially within the European framework. However, attention is paid almost exclusively to the institutional efforts in the

⁹⁹ G. Sartori, *La politica comparata: premesse e problemi*, in «Rivista italiana di scienza politica», I, 1971, pp. 7-66.

fight against mafia and organised crime: political science has hitherto neglected the analysis of social movements and bottom-up collective mobilisation against the arbitrary and inherently authoritarian exercise of mafia power.

Research on mafias in Italian political science: some closing remarks

In its breadth and plurality of approaches, the research produced by the Italian political science field reflects the intrinsic complexity of the social (and political) phenomenon called ‘mafia’ and organised crime, both at the conceptual level and at the empirical level. However, the variety of interpretative paradigms available within the political science ‘toolbox’ is not a limitation, but rather a factor of potential enrichment of the research decryption keys that can be used when trying to decipher an object of study having peculiar manifestations. In fact, mafia is by its very nature difficult to translate into observable indicators, oscillating alternatively between almost complete impenetrability, opaque and contradictory signals, forced (but still partial and influenced) insights. Further intersections and hybrids between different research methodologies and perspectives are not only a foreseeable, but also a desirable outcome of future research developments aimed at capturing the many facets of mafia. This can also happen through new interdisciplinary intersections. The research trajectories followed so far by Italian political science when faced with the epistemological challenge represented by mafias and criminal organisations share a dominant perspective of ‘positive analysis’, i.e., analysis aimed at describing, understanding and explaining – with varying degrees of generalisability – causal connections between empirical evidence and their temporal evolution.

In this last respect, a review of the academic contributions of Italian political science to studies on mafias shows that there is still an unsatisfied demand for knowledge, to which the field can provide an important, if not crucial, contribution. In fact, it seems desirable to make greater efforts in order to study analytically the measures and policy tools of political and regulatory intervention that could potentially be more effective in draining the breeding ground in which the mafia thrives, and in opposing its activities and territorial roots. This is especially important in a phase in which financial capitals, interests and criminal activities are projected towards new conquerable lands, interfacing with political and institutional actors who are often unable to timely grasp the alarm signals and activate the necessary countermeasures. A clearer ‘normative’ and prescriptive definition of a political science research agenda could focus both on the analysis of organisational fragility points in criminal associations, and on the

critical evaluation of the effects of existing measures, from the dissolution of municipal councils due to criminal infiltration to criminal charges for the 'exchange of votes' between politicians and mafia, to name but a few examples. Thus, by providing a contribution to the public debate and support to policymakers, political science can simultaneously become a driver of reform and an instrument to spread awareness about the potential of institutional counteraction and civic mobilisation against mafias and organised crime.

8. *Medicine. Forensic medicine**

Main research themes investigated in this field's publications

Forensic medicine and Forensic psychopathology contributed 72 scientific products (42 unique ones) on the topic of mafia crimes and organised crime in Italy. Analysing only their titles, it emerges that the main theme is the description of ritual killings typical of mafia crimes, by means of what scientific literature terms 'case reports'.

These represent about a fifth of the total of the research products and are based on the description of murders that are typical of mafia, if not unique to it. This is the case, for example, of the *Lupara bianca*, a term typically used to describe murders attributable to Cosa Nostra in which the corpse is hidden by covering it with a concrete casting. Or again, the description of specific killing rituals, such as the *incaprettamento*, a method by which victims are tied with hands and feet behind their back, like a young goat, destined to those who violate omerta, or the destruction of corpses by means of burnt lime, a typical 'ndrangheta ritual. Another widely recurring theme of study, especially in psychiatric and forensic psychopathology, is the interpretation of mafia murder symbolism, the search for the meaning of the rites of institution, and the consequences in terms of mental health for victims and families affiliated with organised crime. Some scholars have also focused on the analysis of the methods with which investigations were carried out when dealing with mafia murders. Sicilian scholars have undertaken a significant analysis of the Capaci massacre and the murder of judge Falcone. Another subject, more of a sociological and jurisprudential nature rather than purely medical, was addressed in about 15-20% of the publications. On the one

* This paper has been written by Francesco Introna.